South Haven Tribune

$3

December 21, 2025

Photo provided / South Haven Area Emergency Services

South Haven Area Emergency Services' drone captures an image of the crowd waiting for the beach ball drop at the intersection of Center and Phoenix streets in the downtown area to signal the start of 2022.

SH preps for NYE festivities

A look at the work that goes into end-of-year celebration

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — The annual New Year's Eve celebration in South Haven brings visitors and tourists together to ring in the new year with a ball and a bang.

"People just think of summer in South Haven. The summer's so busy, but New Year's Eve is really amazing, too," Mayor Annie Brown said. "When you think of all the people who come to town in the middle of winter to see the ball drop and to celebrate the fireworks – it's a great event."

Before the event can take place, there is a lot of preparation and collaboration that happens to make sure everything runs smoothly and safely.

"It is a year-round planning process," Visit South Haven Executive Director Jennifer Sistrunk said. "We literally sign contracts for the following years on the very next week after the new year."

There are two main events that occur during the New Year's Eve celebration, including the fireworks show over the harbor and the 1,000 beach ball drop at midnight.

"Those are the two big things," Sistrunk said. "The firework show, it requires a lot of permitting, both from the city, from (and) from the (U.S.) Coast Guard; just up and down, there's a lot of safety procedures and things that have to go with that and that does take some time."

The event started eight years ago as a way to draw visitors and residents to South Haven during the winter.

"In the past before we had this, there wasn't a lot of activity around New Year's Eve," Sistrunk said. "People would go out of town, they would go to different things, other places and we just felt like ... we're very busy in the summer. People come to the beach and everything, but there's so much more to South Haven than just the summer and beaches."

Sistrunk said they wanted to help showcase not just the city, but the local businesses that are open year-round.

"That was really important to us to really just showcase the town and a time where some people may not think that we are open or available when we certainly are," Sistrunk said. "That's a big misconception, so that was the thought process behind that – to just give people a thing to do."

Becky Burkert / Tribune file photo

Members of the South Haven Visitors Bureau are shown six years ago getting ready for the town's inaugural beachball drop during the New Year's Eve celebration. This year's New Year's Eve celebration in downtown South Haven will also include a beachball drop in which a tarp full of 1,000 beach balls will be lifted high into the air by a tall South Haven Area Emergency Services fire truck parked in the middle of the Phoenix and Center street intersection. At the stroke of midnight, the beachballs will be released into the crowd.

An eye on the ball

In order to entice people to come out into the cold, Sistrunk said they had to think of something unique to do.

"Times Square, they do the ball drop and Traverse City they do a cherry drop, things like that some communities will have those," Sistrunk said. "But the beach ball drop, a thousand beach balls is quite unique, especially being held by a fire truck."

Before the beach balls are loaded up in the net and ready to drop, someone has to blow them up and Sistrunk said there is one guy who has been doing it the past five years.

"We have one guy that curates a team," Sistrunk said. "He blows them up in the garage and he has a system. I want to say it takes a few hours to get those done depending on how many helpers that he has."

After the balls are blown up, that are loaded into a net, but it wasn't always a net that held up the beach balls. During the first year of the celebration, US Tarp manufactured four long tubes that was put around the intersection to drop the beach balls, but it didn't work.

"It's been many years of us trying to tweak that and get that right," Sistrunk said.

The final design for the beach ball release was a large net that holds the beach balls and has a release mechanism.

"We've had some years where it's worked, we've had some years where the balls did not quite drop at midnight," Sistrunk said. "We've had some years where they dropped early and so that's been a fun thing to work on that we've literally been working on every year for the past eight years to refine that."

US Tarp makes the net and a local towing company transports the bag of beach balls from Hotel Nichols, which stores the beach balls in their

See NYE, page A2

SH council approves social contract

City manager gets 4 percent raise after annual eval

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven City Council approved a social contract this week meant to guide current and future council members on how to behave during meetings and debates.

"Two meetings ago, council had discussions regarding code of conduct and directed our office to come back with a shorter version for council's consideration," City Attorney Dave Eberle said Monday. "Working through this, there were a couple things that council had seemed wanted to see; they wanted something enforceable and they also wanted something aspirational."

Eberle presented two options for consideration: rules for decorum and debate or a social contract.

"One is a resolution establishing rules for decorum and debate and these would be binding, parliamentary rules of debate that the council is opposing on itself," Eberle said. "The other document is a social contract and this leans into the desire to have something aspirational. I simply set forth what I thought were some good guidelines and things for council members to aspire to."

This stemmed from the city council wanting a code of conduct after two incidents occurred during the city council meetings in 2024 and 2025.

An ad hoc committee was formed to create the code of conduct and Eberle presented the draft during the Nov. 17 special meeting. After more discussion, city council asked to have the document pared down. The city council voted to approve the social contract Monday.

Employment agreement

City council approved an employment agreement with City Manager Kate Hosier.

In a previous meeting, the city council went into closed session to conduct the annual evaluation for Hosier.

"She had a very strong evaluation, so this was an easy decision to make and I feel we are lucky to have her," Mayor Annie Brown said.

Council Member Mary Hosley asked for clarification on when it was decided

See COUNCIL, page A2

Ken Flowers named next LMC president

Board picks successor for Kubatzke, who retires at end of 2026

By RALPH HEIBUTZKI
Paxton Media Group

BENTON TOWNSHIP — Lake Michigan College board members are launching the institution's latest leadership chapter with Ken Flowers as its next president.

That chapter began Tuesday night, when the board unanimously voted to begin contract talks with Flowers, the sole declared candidate to replace LMC's current president, Trevor Kubatzke, who will retire Dec. 31, 2026. He's led LMC since 2017.

Flowers after the vote thanked the board and his colleagues "for honoring me with this opportunity."

"I think everyone in this place knows how much this place means to me, coming from when I grew up, two miles from here – I rode in this place's parking lot when I was 7 years old. So this means a lot to me, and you will not regret it. Being under Dr. Kubatzke, we'll build on what he's built, and get better from here,"

FLOWERS

he told the board.

LMC Board Chairman Joan Smith expressed similar thoughts in a press release issued after the board's decisions.

"Dr. Flowers' leadership reflects the very best of Lake Michigan College," Smith said. "His deep understanding of our students, our community, and the role community colleges play in regional economic vitality make him exceptionally well-suited to lead LMC into its next chapter."

Kubatzke has led the college since 2017. Flowers, LMC's executive vice president, has served in many different positions since he started there in 1997 as a part-time machining and manufacturing instructor.

Some of his former roles include serving as dean of career and workforce education, director of workforce training and development, and chairman of the technology department.

The Flowers vision

The momentum toward Tuesday's outcome has been building for about a

See LMC, page A2

The Tribune: Celebrating Our 126th Year

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Support the Local Businesses Who Help Support Our Community!

NYE

From page A1

garage before the event.

"We actually fill them up in the garage at Hotel Nichols," Sistrunk said. "We fill them up in the garage, the towing company comes and a team of us lift them up onto the flatbed and they haul it in the middle of town."

The beach balls are then lifted up by the firetruck and released at midnight at the intersection of Center Street and Phoenix Street.

"The New Year's Eve celebration and the ball drop and the fireworks, it really requires an all-hands-on-deck approach," Brown said.

Photo provided / Tom Renner

People crowd into the main square in downtown South Haven at midnight on New Year's Eve in 2021 to listen to a live DJ as 1,000 beach balls drop down from a large nylon mesh bag mounted to a fire truck ladder, high above the intersection.

An evening of events

New Year's Eve and Ice Breaker are the only two events to close the streets downtown South Haven throughout the year.

With that comes a lot of safety procedures and rerouting traffic, Sistrunk said.

"We rely on our fire (department), they bring in their fire truck to hold the beach ball net," she said. "They man the station (and) they're actually the ones that pull the release cord that drops the balls at midnight – so they're essential."

Sistrunk said her team works with the city, fire and police departments to make sure everything is set up properly and ready for the event.

"The police, they make sure that we're safe," Sistrunk said. "They make sure that we have all the proper signs out that says that the roads are closed and the city of South Haven is a huge, huge help. We could not do it without them."

Before the two main events at midnight, the celebration features other events and activities for people to enjoy including a DJ, street performers and food trucks. Attendees can also visit businesses downtown that stay open until midnight.

Sistrunk said one new thing they will have this year is a 360-degree photo booth, sponsored by Big Blue Rentals.

"Every year they partner with us to come up with some new experience and this year we have our 360 photo booth. We actually have two of them," Sistrunk said. "You kind of stand on a stage and the camera just swivels around you and it will be really fun."

The photo booth is free of charge with a recommended donation for The Sake of Being Humane.

Sistrunk said they are also trying a new program to help people get home safely after the event if they have been drinking.

Becky Burkert / Tribune file photo

Eli Torres, right, dances to "YMCA" along with Sophia Torres and Shawn Sanders during the New Year's Eve Celebration in downtown South Haven in 2015.

"We're calling ringing responsibly and we are co-hosting with New Holland Spirits," she said. "Basically, those who choose not to drink alcohol that night, if they would like to sign up to be a designated driver, they can go to New Holland Spirits and sign up to be a designated driver."

The drivers will receive a designated driver button and a complementary soda ticket.

There will also be a trolly shuttle that runs from 6 p.m. to 1 a.m. that makes stops downtown, at the American Legion, The Lodge and Three Blondes Brewing.

The ice rink will be open for people to skate and Sistrunk said they partnered with Sturgis Bank to have the first 100 people who come skate on New Year's Eve, skate for free for the entire night.

For more information about the event, go to southhaven.org.

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

COUNCIL

From page A1

to give Hosier a 4 percent raise instead of a 3 percent raise and a $4,000 bonus instead of a $3,000 bonus that was previously discussed.

Brown said the change was a result of the negotiations of the employment agreement.

Council Member Jeff Arnold said during the meeting he thought the 3 percent raise was a jumping off point for discussion and not a hard number.

Yearly summary

Hosier presented an end-of-year summary during the meeting.

"We've gotten a lot done this year," Hosier said. "Our first priority was housing and we were able to get some plans that are going to the planning commission for the Overton property."

Other housing highlights included development opportunities in South Haven Township; 275 vacant parcels within city limits that are not owned by the city, but could be an option for housing in the future; a planned unit development for six homes on Virginia Avenue has been submitted and Trailside II continues to build homes.

Hosier also presented a summary of the lifeguard program progress.

"We just recently had a staff strategic planning meeting to kind of put things in motion," Hosier said. "We have posted our chief lifeguard position on our website."

In the overview of the year's finances, Hosier said the total expenditures for 2025 was $13,705,044, which is a 4.55 percent increase from 2024 at 13,108,885.

The total revenue for 2025 was $13,761,923, which is a 3.66 percent increase from 2024 at $13,276,298.

Other highlights included the construction of the elevated water tank; final installation of the Kids Corner play equipment; reconstruction of Huron Street, Elkenburg Street and the Aylworth non-motorized path; and Adam DeBoer being promoted to police chief.

Other items

City council approve three special events including:

■ South Haven Pride in the Park to be held on June 26 through 28 in Stanley Johnston Park.

■ Break the Ice 5K to be held from 10 a.m. to noon on Jan. 1, starting on Kalamazoo Street and ending at the Southside Marina.

■ Island Sit to be held on Feb. 28 at the Welcome Island on Phoenix Street.

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

LMC

From page A1

decade, in his mind, Flowers said afterward.

"I'm really looking forward to it – from a leadership perspective, I've been preparing myself for a long time, so this is not new. When Trevor was here his first week, we talked about – I told him, my goal was to be a president, so he's been following me that way, all along," he said.

As president, Flowers expects to continue building on the foundation that Kubatzke laid down, in terms of improving LMC's infrastructure and programming, "to be what the community needs us to be, and when they need it – that's really important to me," he said.

Flowers said he laid out those ideas from the beginning in the assorted interviews and forums with board members, faculty, staff, students and residents, which also characterized the search process.

"I said that again and again, in my interviews – student success, community impact, (being) action-oriented. That's going to be my vision, going forward," he said.

Closing a chapter

Tuesday's vote closed a chapter that began last September, when Kubatzke announced his retirement plans.

The board then hired a consulting firm, the Pauly Group, of Springfield, Ill., to lead its search, which – once Flowers declared his candidacy – focused on whether to proceed with him, or open a national search.

The board then named a special committee of LMC Board Trustee John Grover, Secretary Mark Weber and Trustee Mary Jo Tomasini to resolve those issues.

Board members seemed close to a final decision last month, but tabled it, so they could review Kubatzke's contract, and relevant policy language for presidential transitions, among other items.

Grover, who chaired the search committee, expects negotiations with Flowers to wrap up by February 2026, and basic details of his contract to be released by then.

"We were very close last month, and we just needed an opportunity to re-review all the material we had. And it came out, obviously, as you can see, a no-brainer for Ken," he said, after the vote.

The extra time, considering the importance of the decision, and board members' need to make sure that all their remaining questions were answered, was needed, Grover said.

"We really wanted to make sure that we had everybody on board, the full board in agreement – it was better for us to take the time, and agree on, unanimously, how that was going to go," he said.

Beginning the transition

Kubatzke hopes to sit down with Flowers next week and start discussing the mechanics of the transition. He expects to graduate his last class in May 2026.

"The actual transition will happen some time after that, and then, I'll be in a supporting role for a little, helping him transition, any projects that he needs, like facilities (staff) negotiations this summer – I can do that for him. So he'll be putting together a list for me, probably some time around June 1, and we'll go from there," he said.

Kubatzke said that it feels good knowing that LMC can start planning, because a national search would have taken more time.

"It's nice having it settled. I have full faith in Ken. I have worked with him for the last nine and a half years, to prepare him for his next venture, and I think he's ready," he said.

Al-Van Humane Society
Adopt ♥ Volunteer ♥ Donate ♥ Advocate
73303 8th Ave. PO Box 421 South Haven, MI 49090
phone 269.637.5062 fax 269.639.2242
Mon, Tue, Thurs, Fri 11 am to 5:30 pm; Sat 11 am to 3 pm; Wed, Sun Closed

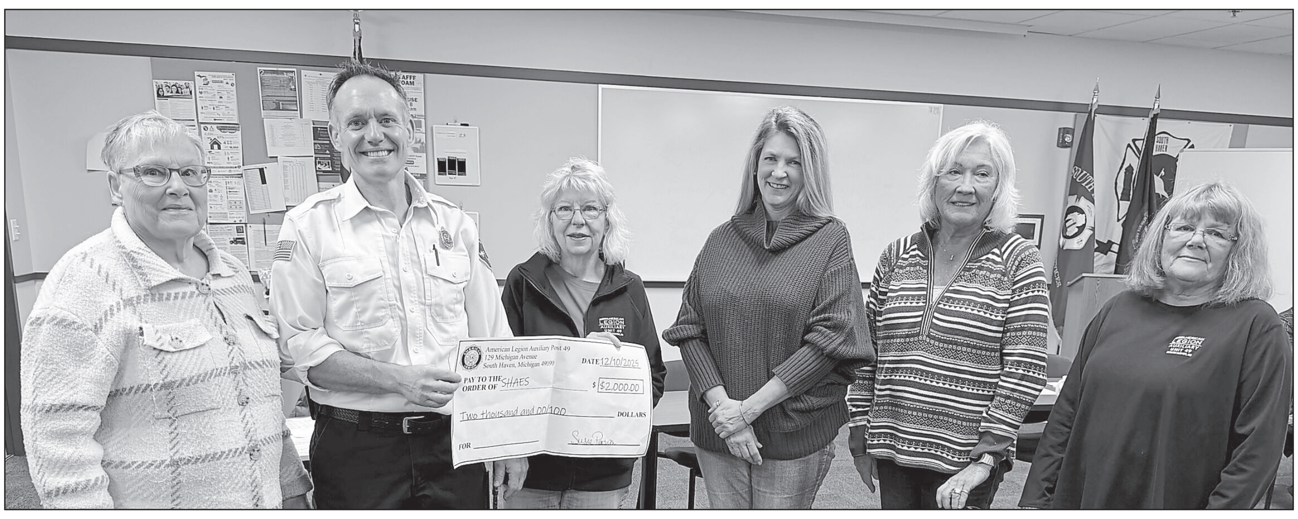
Meet our Pet of the Week, Kida!

Kida is a 1-year-old sweetheart with a big personality and an even bigger heart. This outgoing black-and-white beauty loves attention and isn't shy about asking for it. She's affectionate, friendly, and always happy to be part of whatever is going on around her. Her most striking feature is the adorable black markings on her face that make her truly one of a kind. With her sweet nature and charming looks, Kida is the kind of cat who makes herself right at home and quickly becomes a beloved companion. She's ready to bring love, fun, and a little extra flair to her forever family. Submit an adoption survey at al-van.org/adopt

Holiday Angel Adoption Event

This holiday season, Al-Van is spreading extra cheer with our Holiday Angel Adoption Event. Thanks to a generous donor, all adoption fees are fully covered from December 18th through December 31st. That means you can welcome a new furry family member home for the holidays at no cost. If you've been thinking about adopting, now is the perfect time to make a life-changing match and give a shelter pet the gift of a forever home. Visit Al-Van Humane Society to meet your new best friend and learn more.

THIS WEEK'S WISH LIST
Wet dog food and pate-style cat food



Photos provided

The American Legion Post 49 Auxiliary contributed $2,000 toward the purchase of a new fire boat for South Haven Area Emergency Services.

SH emergency services to acquire new fire boat

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven Area Emergency Services Authority Board recently approved the $400,000 purchase of a new fire boat to enhance water-based fire suppression, rescue, and dive response capabilities.

According to a news release, the boat will be put into service in 2027 and replace a 27-year-old Zodiac vessel.

The area served by the South Haven emergency services includes 10 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline – from Van Buren State Park north to Casco Township. In addition, there are 1,000 boats in the harbor and along the Black River.

The new vessel is a 28-foot Sounder manufactured by North River Boats of Roseburg, Oregon, and will be specially equipped to serve the dive team and have a 500-GPM pump to support marine and shoreline fire suppression.

Fire Chief Brandon Hinz said in the release that they were able to bring the cost of the new boat within the authority's capital replacement budget through a favorable manufacturer discount from North River.

"To support rapid deployment and response times, the city of South Haven has generously offered dock space near the City North Marina, an optimal location for emergency operations on Lake Michigan," the release sated. "The current boat is trailered and needs to be launched before responding to emergencies."

Due to the dock's exposure to channel swell and surge, a boat lift will be required to protect the vessel, extend its service life and ensure long-term reliability. While the fireboat was budgeted, the lift itself was not included in the capital plan.

The American Legion Post 49 Auxiliary recently contributed $2,000 toward the $30,000 boat lift.

Hinz said in the release that fundraising efforts are continuing toward the lift.

"We are pleased to honor the service SHAES provides our community each and every day," Auxiliary President Mary Fitzgerald said in the release. "SHAES provides vital services to our communities every day, most often assisting veterans and their families in time of need."

South Haven Area Emergency Services will purchase a new 28-foot Sounder fire boat, which will be equipped to serve the dive team and support marine and shoreline fire suppression.

Huizenga announces reelection campaign

Runs to combat inflation, improve affordability

By LOUISE WREGE
Paxton Media Group

U.S. Rep. Bill Huizenga, R-Zeeland, announced Monday morning that he is running for reelection of Michigan's 4th District.

He made the announcement on Facebook and at Breakfast with Bill, hosted by the West Coast Chamber of Commerce in Holland, according to Brian Patrick, communications director for Huizenga.

"There were about 250 people in attendance and they talked about healthcare and all kinds of stuff and the host asked him about his plans for 2026, and he made the announcement," Patrick said.

In his post on Facebook, Huizenga said he is running to combat record inflation and improve affordability.

"I've secured historic new tax cuts and ensured Michiganders across all walks of life keep more of their hard-earned money," Huizenga said in his post. "I also voted to lower energy prices while championing transformative energy investments here in Southwest Michigan."

Huizenga was first elected as a U.S. representative in 2011 and has been representing the 4th District since it was first formed in 2022.

The reconfigured 4th District includes all of Allegan and Van Buren counties, plus parts of Berrien, Calhoun, Kalamazoo and Ottawa counties. Much of its territory had previously been part of the former 2nd District, which Huizenga had represented since 2011.

Nuclear power

Earlier this month, Huizenga announced that Palisades Nuclear Plant in Covert will receive $400 million from the U.S. Department of Energy to help construct two small modular reactors.

HUIZENGA

"This critical project is something I have advocated for both in a bipartisan as well as an individual manner with the Trump Administration," Huizenga said in a news release. "This advanced technology will help power an additional 1.4 million homes, multiply power generation capacity at Palisades, and make the facility's contribution to our energy security and overall energy supply even more significant."

Harbor Towers

In January of 2024, Huizenga toured Harbor Towers in Benton Harbor with Mayor Marcus Muhammad.

After the tour, Huizenga said it's time to come up with a plan to fix the eight-story, 92-unit federally subsidized apartment complex.

In November of 2024, Muhammad said almost $50 million was expected to be spent to rehabilitate federally subsidized housing in the city, including at Harbor Towers, through the Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program run by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Muhammad has said the residents of Harbor Towers deserve to be treated the same way residents of Lake View Terrace residents were treated when that federally subsidized apartment complex in St. Joseph was renovated in 2023.

Members of the Benton Harbor Housing Commission, which owns Harbor Towers, said in August that plans to renovate the towers were taking longer than expected as technical details are worked out.

Patrick said Huizenga was pressing HUD officials last week during a committee meeting on why the renovation of Harbor Towers was being delayed.

Contact: lwrege@TheHP.com, 932-0361, Twitter: @HPWrege

Photo provided

Lakeshore Habitat for Humanity South Haven ReStore completed several store upgrades to enhance customer's shopping experience.

Habitat for Humanity upgrades South Haven ReStore

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — Lakeshore Habitat for Humanity South Haven ReStore recently completed several store upgrades.

According to a news release, the enhancements included expanding product lines in paint, paint supplies, fabric rolls, and rugs; new wood laminate and tile flooring selections and a reimagined used furniture layout designed to improve the shopping experience for customers.

"Lakeshore Habitat ReStores offer free donation pickup, which can be scheduled conveniently through their website," the release stated. "Donated items are kept out of landfills and resold to the public at substantial discounts, supporting the mission of providing safe, stable and affordable homes for local families."

The South Haven ReStore also offers free deconstruction services. The professional, fully insured team can carefully remove cabinets, appliances, fixtures and other items during renovations or remodels so they can be resold in the ReStore, with all proceeds going to support Lakeshore Habitat for Humanity's homebuilding efforts.

"Lakeshore Habitat for Humanity, an affiliate of Habitat for Humanity International, has been dedicated to building homes, communities, and hope in Ottawa, Allegan and Van Buren counties since 1990," the release stated. "Through new home construction, an expanding Home Repair program and the operation of two ReStores in Holland and South Haven, the organization is committed to creating a world where everyone has a safe and affordable place to live."

For more information, go to www.lakeshorehabitat.org

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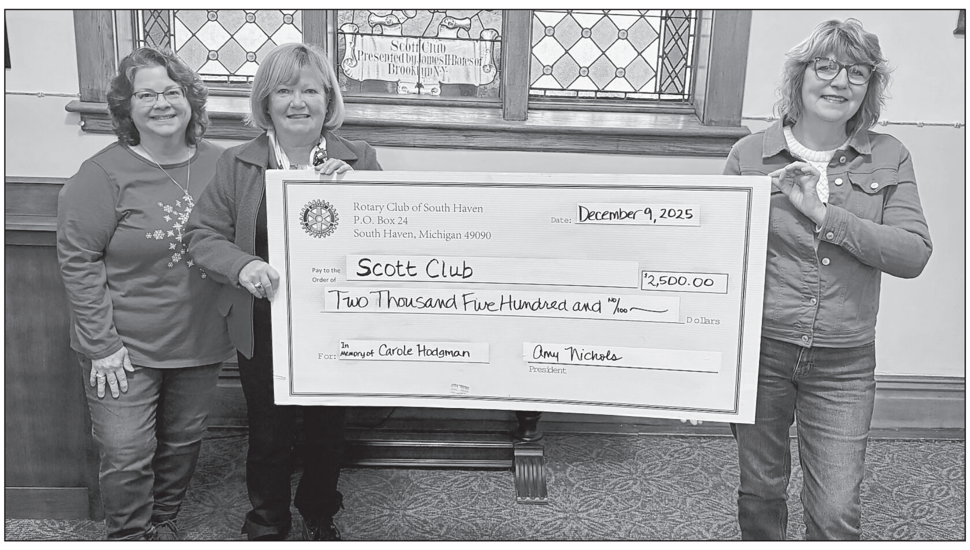

Photo provided

The Rotary Club of South Haven awarded the Carole Hodgman Memorial Grant of $2,500 to the South Haven Scot Club.

Rotary club honors Carole Hodgman with memorial grant

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The Rotary Club of South Haven recently announced the awarding of the 2025 Carole Hodgman Memorial Grant to support the South Haven Scott Club programs.

According to a news release, the grant is a $2,500 contribution honoring the life and legacy of Carole Hodgman, a member of the Rotary family and wife of long-time Rotarian Don Hodgman.

"Carole was deeply committed to service, community connection and lifelong learning," the release stated. "The grant awarded in her memory will support a range of programs at the South Haven Scott Club—a nonprofit organization Carole held dear and dedicated much of her life to."

The Scott Club provides inclusive, year-round programming including concerts, author talks, children's workshops and community cultural events.

"Carole exemplified the spirit of Service Above Self," South Haven Rotary President Amy Nichols said in the release. "By supporting the Scott Club's educational, cultural and intergenerational programs, we honor her enduring commitment to making a difference in the community she loved."

The Rotary Club contributes $40,000 annually to local organizations and initiatives.

"The Rotary Club of South Haven has been dedicated to serving the community through projects that reflect its mission of service above self," the release stated. "The Club strives to make a positive and lasting impact in South Haven and around the world."

Founded in 1883, the South Haven Scott Club is an all-volunteer organization of over 110 members. Originally established as a reading circle, it continues today as a steward of its 1893 Michigan Historic Site, offering year-round cultural, educational and artistic programming both in person and online.

"Its mission is to foster inclusive community engagement by providing a historically significant landmark as a center for the advancement of culture, the arts, education and fellowship," the release stated.

The Scott Club's broad programming includes author talks, musical performances through its concert series with Foundry Hall, book discussions, children's workshops, community holiday events and collaborations with local organizations including the National Blueberry Festival, Youth Development Company and the Mitten Children's Museum.

"Through this grant, the Rotary Club of South Haven proudly celebrates Carole Hodgman's remarkable legacy of service, generosity and community spirit, ensuring that the causes she championed will continue to inspire and empower future generations," the release stated.

South Haven Tribune CLASSIFIEDS

0100 ANNOUNCEMENTS

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0200 EMPLOYMENT

The City of South Haven is seeking qualified candidates for the **Beach Safety Manager/ Chief Lifeguard.** Responsible for the oversight and coordination of all open water lifeguard and beach enforcement operations within the City of South Haven. The incumbent is expected to possess advanced knowledge of lifesaving practices in open water environments, emergency response operations, personnel management, public education, and administrative leadership.

Bachelor's degree in Public Administration, Recreation, Emergency Services, or related field preferred. Five years of experience in Public Safety Operations (open water lifeguard operations preferred), including at least one year of supervisory or management experience. Current EMT- Basic certification preferred. Valid State of Michigan Driver's License. Must pass the USLA open water swim test.

Candidates may apply online at www.southhavenmi.gov/human_resources or by mailing a resume and cover letter to City of South Haven, Attn HR, 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven, MI 49090.

The City of South Haven is an Equal Opportunity Employer who places a high value on diversity, equity and inclusion.

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0900 LEGALS

Meeting Synopsis
Casco Township Board Meeting
Monday, December 15th, 2025
Call to Order: Overhiser called the meeting to order at 7:00PM and led in the Pledge of Allegiance. **Present:** Overhiser, Ridley, Clevenger, Campbell & Fleming **Items Approved:** Amendments to the Outdoor Gathering Ordinance, Senior & Road Millages to be added to the Ballot in August 2026
Adjournment: 8:40 PM
Allen Overhiser, Casco Township Supervisor
Rachel Ridley, Casco Twp Clerk

Township Board Meeting Schedule 2026
Regular Meetings of the South Haven Charter Township Board will be held on the 2nd Wednesday of each month @ 7:30 p.m., at the South Haven Township Hall, 09761 Blue Star Memorial Highway (southwest corner of Blue Star & M-140)

January 14th	July 8th
February 11th	August 12th
March 11th	September 9th
April 8th	October 14th
May 13th	November 11th
June 10th	December 9th

LEARN Something New Every day in the NEWSPAPER!

0900 LEGALS

**STATE OF MICHIGAN
PROBATE COURT**
Van Buren **COUNTY**

**NOTICE TO CREDITORS
Decedent's Estate**

CASE NO. and JUDGE
25-1195-DE
METZGER

Court address
212 E. Paw Paw ST., Ste 220
Paw Paw, MI 49079
Court telephone no.
269-657-8225

Estate of Barbara Jean Merriweather
Date of birth: 02/17/1937

TO ALL CREDITORS: **

NOTICE TO CREDITORS: The decedent, Barbara Jean Merriweather, died October 29, 2025. Creditors of the decedent are notified that all claims against the estate will be forever barred unless presented to Fred Madden, personal representative, or to both the probate court at 212 E. Paw Paw St., Paw Paw and the personal representative within 4 months after the date of publication of this notice.

December 15, 2025
Date

Albert W. Laaksonen II P43920
Attorney **Bar no.**
226 1/2 E. Michigan Ave
Address
Paw Paw, MI 49079
City, State, Zip
269-655-1035
Telephone

Fred Madden
Personal Representative
5044 River View Dr.
Address
Coloma, MI 49038
City, state, zip
(269)235-2970
Telephone

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PUBLIC NOTICE SOUTH HAVEN CHARTER TOWNSHIP
Planning Commission Regular Meeting Schedule 2026

Regular meetings of the Planning Commission will be held on the 1st Wednesday of each month at 7:00PM, at the South Haven Township Hall, 09761 Blue Star Memorial Highway (southwest corner of Blue Star & M-140).

January 7	July 1
February 4	August 5
March 4	September 2
April 1	October 7
May 6	November 4
June 3	December 2

Special meetings of the Planning Commission are called by the Chairperson and notice will be posted on the door of the Township Hall and Township website at least 48 hours prior.

Monthly scheduled meetings may be cancelled up to 48 hours prior to the meeting if no agenda items or lack of quorum.

All meetings of the Planning Commission are open to the public. Written comments on agenda items may be mailed to the Township Hall 09761 Blue Star Highway, e-mailed to shtwp.zoninga@gmail.com, or delivered to the Township Hall by 4:00PM the day prior to a meeting.

**SOUTH HAVEN CHARTER TOWNSHIP
VAN BUREN COUNTY, MICHIGAN
NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING**

PLEASE TAKE NOTICE that the Planning Commission of South Haven Charter Township will conduct a public hearing and regular meetings for the following matters on Wednesday, January 7, 2026, 7:00 p.m. at the South Haven Township Hall, 09761 Blue Star Hwy, South Haven MI 49090.
PLEASE TAKE NOTICE that the item(s) to be considered include the following:

1. RCQ Properties LLC (Marc Compton) has petitioned to amend an approved site plan for a special use; construct 40x65-3 sided storage building at 73230 8th Ave 80-17-011-019-02

PLEASE TAKE FURTHER NOTICE that the applications can be reviewed at the Township Hall during the zoning administrator hours Tues's 9-12p and Thurs's 1:30-4p or call 269-637-3305 / 1-800-626-5964 or request by email mtsallegan@frontier.com. Written comment may also be submitted to the zoning administrator.
PLEASE TAKE FURTHER NOTICE that written comments may be submitted to the Township Clerk at the address set forth below, during regular business hours of regular business days or by mail at the address set forth below, up to the date of the hearing and will also be accepted by the Planning Commission at the hearing.
South Haven Charter Township will provide necessary reasonable auxiliary aids and services to individuals with disabilities at the hearing upon seven (7) days' notice to the South Haven Charter Township Clerk.

South Haven Charter Township Hall
Brenda Bertorelli, Clerk
09761 Blue Star Highway
South Haven, MI 49090
269-637-3305

**STATE OF MICHIGAN
IN THE 7th DISTRICT COURT FOR THE COUNTY OF VAN BUREN
1007 E. Wells St. South Haven, MI 49090**

OMNI COMMUNITY CREDIT UNION,
a Michigan Credit Union,
Plaintiff,

Hon.: Arthur H. Clark III
v. Case No.: 25-0855-GC

ANGELO THOMAS GRIFFIOEN
an individual.
Defendant.
_____________________//
Lana M. Escamilla (P71275)
Lewis Reed & Allen, P.C.
Attorneys for Plaintiff
136 E. Michigan Avenue, Ste. 800
Kalamazoo, MI 49007
(269) 388-7600
_____________________//

ORDER FOR SERVICE OF PROCESS BY PUBLICATION

At a session of court held in the courthouse in the City of South Haven, Conty of Van Buren, State of Michigan on the 9th day of December 2025.
Present: Honorable Arthur H. Clarke, III, District Court Judge

Plaintiff filed a verified ex parte motion for service of process in the discretion of the court. After reading the motion and the accompanying affidavit and exhibits, the court finds that Plaintiff has shown that service of process cannot reasonably be made on Defendant, Angelo Thomas Griffioen, by the methods provided in MCR 2.105(A), in that Plaintiff has demonstrated that diligent attempts to locate Defendant and Defendant's current address and to serve Defendant by personal service have not been successful. The court further finds, pursuant to MCR 2.105(J), that service of process by publication is the best available method of service of process reasonably calculated to give Defendant actual notice of the proceedings and an opportunity to be heard.

IT IS ORDERED:

1. Plaintiff may serve process on Defendant by publishing the following notice once each week for a period of three consecutive weeks in a newspaper, as defined in MCR 2.106(F), that is published in the county of Defendant's last known address:

"You are being sued as of August 1, 2025, by Plaintiff, Omni Community Credit Union, against Defendant, Angelo Thomas Griffioen, in the Van Buren County District Court for the State of Michigan for return of the 2023 Polaris and also for damages in favor of Plaintiff and against Defendant in the amount of $17,127.24, together with costs of this suit, interest, and actual, reasonable attorney fees and grant such other relief as may be just and equitable including possession of the following described property: Plaintiff seeks claim and delivery of a 2023 Polaris ZZ3RAD92AK ID number 3NSRAD924PF290334, and Defendant must answer or take other action permitted by law within 28 days after the last date of publication. If Defendant does not answer or take other action within the time allowed, judgment may be entered against him for the relief demanded in the complaint."

Plaintiff must mail a copy of this order, along with a summons and a copy of the complaint, and the motion for possession pending judgment with restraining order and notice of hearing by first-class mail to the Defendant's last address and verified PO Box address.

/s/ Hon. Arthur H. Clarke, III, District Court Judge
Prepared by:
Lewis Reed & Allen, P.C.
Lana M. Escamilla (P71275)
Attorney for Plaintiff
136 E. Michigan Ave., Ste. 800, Kalamazoo, MI 49007

CITY OF SOUTH HAVEN PUBLIC HEARING NOTICE PLANNING COMMISSION

On Thursday, January 8, 2026, the Planning Commission for the City of South Haven will hear public comments related to the following request(s). The public hearing(s) will be held at 7:00 P.M. at City Hall, 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven concerning the following:
1. Special Land Use Application – 333 North Shore Dr
Zach Effa of Creative Landscaping and Design, LLC has submitted a special land use application to install an inground pool in the waterfront yard at 333 North Shore Dr in the City of South Haven. The parcel number for the referenced address is 80-53-831-013-00.
2. Special Land Use Application – 313 Center St
Mr. James Ollgard, on behalf of the Historical Association of South Haven, has submitted a special land use application to use the upper floors of the existing building at 313 Center St in the City of South Haven as a hotel. The parcel number for the referenced address is 80-53-503-003-40.
3. Planned Unit Development Amendment Application – Everett Park / Trailside
Mr. Matt O'Connor has submitted an application to amend the approved Everett Park / Trailside planned unit development at 900 Indiana Ave and 1070 Indiana Ave, located at the southwest corner of the intersection of Elkenburg St and Indiana Ave in the City of South Haven. The proposed amendment will add 16 two-family dwelling units, for a total of 32 dwelling units. The parcel numbers for the referenced addresses are 80-53-240-001-50 and 80-53-260-005-10.
4. Planned Unit Development Application-706 and 712 Virginia Ave
Mr. and Mrs. Michael and Carrie Lynch have submitted a application for planned unit development (PUD) rezoning and approval of a PUD preliminary plan for the properties located at 706 and 712 Virginia Avenue in the City of South Haven. The proposed condominium development would include six single-family dwelling units and a riverfront dock with six boat slips. The parcel numbers for the referenced addresses are 80-53-852-024-00 and 80-53-870-001-01.
Supporting documentation is available for review at the Building Services office, 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven, MI 49090 during normal business hours. Written comments may be submitted in lieu of or in addition to a personal appearance. Written comments must be received no later than 12 p.m. (noon) on Thursday, January 8, 2026. Written comments should be addressed to the Planning Commission and must be submitted to the Zoning Administrator at kdissette@southhavenmi.gov or via postal mail addressed to the Planning Commission and sent to 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven, MI 49090.
Individuals requesting reasonable accommodation for impairments or disabilities should contact the City Clerk no later than five days prior to the public hearing in person at City Hall, at 269-637-0750, or at mkiker@southhavenmi.gov.

Kelly Getman-Dissette
Zoning Administrator
(269) 637-0760
kdissette@southhavenmi.gov

ADVERTISEMENT FOR BIDS
SOUTH HAVEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
ADMINISTRATIONS & TRANSPORTATION BUILDING RENOVATIONS

PROJECT DESCRIPTION
Project consists of work at Administration & Transportation Building. Work consists of Cabling, Audio Video Systems, Security System & Ethernet Switches & WAPS.
BID PROPOSAL
Sealed bids, in triplicate, for the South Haven Athletics Technology Improvements will be received at South Haven Public Schools Administration Building located at 554 Green Street, South Haven MI 49090 on January 14, 2026, at 3:00 PM local time. Bids received after this time will neither be considered nor accepted.
All proposals received by the time and date stated above will be opened and read publicly at the South Haven Public Schools Administration Building located at 554 Green Street, South Haven MI 49090. Bid reading will begin promptly at 3:00pm on January 14, 2026.
Please notify Commtech Design of your intent to bid by January 1, 2026. This ensures you receive all current bidding documentation. Please email Joni Hodsdon at SHbids@commtechdesign.com
Bids will be accepted in the following manner:
- Hand Delivered to South Haven Public Schools **Administration building** located at 554 Green Street, South Haven, MI 49090 by **3:00 PM January 14, 2026** – Any bids received after this time will not be accepted or considered.
In accordance with Section 1267 of the Revised School Code each bid must be accompanied by a sworn and notarized Familiar Disclosure Statement completed by the bidder disclosing any familiar relationships between the Owner or any employee of the Bidder and any member of the District's Board of Education or the Superintendent of the District.
BID DOCUMENTS
The Bidding Documents may be obtained by emailing Joni Hodsdon SHbids@commtechdesign.com ***Bidding Documents will be available December 15, 2025.***
Please note that contractors are responsible to review information on all drawings and specifications.
PRE-BID WALKTHROUGH:
A pre-bid walkthrough will be conducted **Friday December 19, 2025**, starting at 10:00 AM. All contractors are to meet at the Administration Building, 554 Green Street - South Haven MI 49090.
ADDENDUMS/RFI'S
All RFI's must be directed to Bret Emerson at Commtech Design, SHbids@commtechdesign.com The deadline for RFI's is **4:00 PM on Monday December 29, 2025.**
BIDDER QUALIFICATIONS
Bidders submitting a Bid for this Project shall have qualifications as follows: a. shall be a reputable, recognized organization, with at least five (5) years successful experience on work of this type and scope of this project; b. shall have a license where required by public authorities having jurisdiction; c. shall have ample financial resources for work of this magnitude.
BID SECURITY – PERFORMANCE BONDS
Each bid shall be accompanied by good and sufficient bid security or bid bond in an amount not less than 5% of the Bid amount and shall secure the Owner from loss or damage by reason of the withdrawal of the Bid by a Bidder or by failure of the successful Bidder to enter into a Contract with the Owner if his Bid is accepted by the Owner.
The successful Bidder will be required to secure Performance, Labor and Material bonds for all contracts exceeding $50,000 from a surety company having a rating of A- or better, for the full amount of the Contract. Value of that P&L Bond shall be indicated on the proposal form.
BID AWARD
The Board of Education reserves the right to accept or reject any or all bids, either in whole or in part; to award contract to other than the low bidder; to waive any irregularities and/or informalities; and in general, to make awards in any manner deemed to be in the best interests of the owner.

**SOUTH HAVEN CHARTER TOWNSHIP SYNOPSIS
REGULAR MEETING DECEMBER 10, 2025**
PRESENT: Poole, Bertorelli, Wiatrowski, Fisher, Lewandowski, DeGrandchamp, and Stein
ABSENT: None
Motion to approve November 12, 2025, Regular Meeting Minutes.
Zach Kenreich gave a report for SHAES. **Kenny Clevenger** introduced himself as a candidate for State Senate.
Motion to approve the Agenda.
Trustee Poole reported that a final approval was done by the Planning Commission for 54 apartments on 73rd Street. **Trustee Wiatrowski** reported that there are 3 inspections left to do for STR.
Motion to approve the Board Meeting Schedule for 2026.
Motion to approve Jill Sanborn as Deputy Treasurer.
Motion to accept the Planning Commission recommendation for a PUD Rezone for the 52-unit apartment project on 73rd Street and send it to the attorney to be put in form for adoption.
Motion to Adopt Resolution 25-31 to Amend the 2025 Budget.
Motion to reappoint Grant Nicol to another term on the Planning Commission.
Motion to reappoint Lowell Tippman as the ZBA Liaison to the Planning Commission for another term.
Reports were received. W.C.Askew from the Road Commission was in attendance.
Motion to approve payment of bills in the amount of $133,174.73.
Meeting was adjourned at 8:26 p.m.
Respectfully submitted, Brenda Bertorelli, Clerk

ADVERTISEMENT FOR BIDS
SOUTH HAVEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
DISTRICT WIDE WIRELESS UPGRADE
PROJECT DESCRIPTION
Project consists of work at all schools in the district. Work consists of: Replacing all existing Wireless Access Points (WAPS). Adding new WAPs. Providing and upgraded licensing for the WAPS being installed. Remove existing WAP Controllers.
BID PROPOSAL
Sealed bids, in triplicate, for the South Haven Athletics Technology Improvements will be received at **South Haven Public Schools Administration Building located at 554 Green Street, South Haven MI 49090 on January 14, 2026, at 3:00 PM local time.** Bids received after this time will neither be considered nor accepted.
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The successful Bidder will be required to secure Performance, Labor and Material bonds for all contracts exceeding $50,000 from a surety company having a rating of A- or better, for the full amount of the Contract. Value of that P&L Bond shall be indicated on the proposal form.
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The Board of Education reserves the right to accept or reject any or all bids, either in whole or in part; to award contract to other than the low bidder; to waive any irregularities and/or informalities; and in general, to make awards in any manner deemed to be in the best interests of the owner.

PUBLIC/LEGAL NOTICES

To place a public notice, please send your requests to legals@pmginmi.com.

Please allow 48 hours to process, larger legals may need at least four business days.

SOUTH HAVEN INDIVISIBLE FILLS ANGEL TREE WISHES

Members of South Haven Indivisible collected toys for the Salvation Army's Angel Tree Toy Drive.

Photo provided

Michigan Works secures $2.24M in grants for employers

By TRIBUNE STAFF

BENTON HARBOR — Michigan Works Berrien, Cass, Van Buren recently secured $2.24 million in competitive grants from the State of Michigan's Going PRO Talent Fund to help 45 local employers enhance their workforce.

According to a news release, the grants awarded provide funds to local employers for training, developing and retaining employees.

"The Going PRO Talent Fund is still one of the most in-demand resources for Michigan employers," Business Solutions Manager at Michigan Works! Berrien, Cass, Van Buren Michael Mompremier said in the release. "Investing in training builds stronger talent, reinforces the backbone of our workforce, and supports the long-term health of our economy. We're thrilled to help employers skill up more than 1,280 new employees, existing team members, and apprentices—without the added financial strain."

There are many training programs eligible for funding, including classroom training, which prepares individuals with the skills required to meet employers' needs and helps diversify the skill sets of current employees.

Employers can also receive onsite job training reimbursement for wages paid while training a new or existing employee on a new process, new technology, or new machines.

In collaboration with Michigan Works, employers will work with training providers, such as Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center, Lake Michigan College and Southwestern Michigan College to deliver the training resulting from the grants.

Awardees of the recent cycle of Going PRO funds include: Abonmarche Consultants, Inc.; Ausco Products Inc.; Biggby Coffee of Bridgman; Bonnell Aluminum, LLC; Bronson Commons; Bronson South Haven Hospital; C&S Machine Products; C5 Electric; CHT USA Inc.; Colson Group – Albion; Colson Group – Three Oaks; Convergix Automation; Creative Foam; Creative Foam Corporation; DeGroot Inc.; Flamm Pickle & Packing Co.; Flowers Early Learning; Gaishin Manufacturing; Gaishin Manufacturing – Grand Rapids; GLCC Co.; Hanson International; Harloff Manufacturing Company; Health Elevated; Kay Manufacturing; Kenneth Smith Inc.; Lane Automotive; LECO Corporation; Little Bucks Childcare Center; McGuire's Maintenance and Preservation; McGuire's Professional Construction; MIDWEST DIE CORP; Modineer; Nova Stevensville; Paragon Tempered Glass; Primetals Technologies Benton Harbor; Ripple Effects Autism Learning Center; Spartan Tool; Spencer Manufacturing Inc.; Sunberry Paw Paw Beverages Limited LLC; Sunflower Therapy Centers; Susan L. Mayer LLC; The Inn at Harbor Shores; Tigmasters Inc.; Wierco LLC; and Youth Development Company / PAL.

"Throughout 2025, the team at Michigan Works Berrien, Cass, Van Buren helped secure a total of $4.99M in competitive grants from the State of Michigan's Going PRO Talent Fund to help 81 local employers enhance their workforce," the release said. "There were seven industries supported and 2,710 employees trained with this funding."

Michigan Works has additional resources to help employers develop trainings, support growth and hiring needs and retain employees.

The next cycle of Going PRO Talent Fund grant applications is slated to be released by the state in the spring.

For more information about Going PRO, go to Michigan.gov or MiWorks.org/Training-Funds.

Michigan Works of Berrien, Cass, Van Buren specializes in educating, training and employing individuals of all ages.

"We work with local businesses to find out what keeps them up at night and help them tackle the most pressing challenges they may face, including attracting and retaining talent," the release stated.

For more information go to www.miworks.org.

Photos provided

South Haven Elks Lodge awarded a Beacon Grant check of $6,000 to Don Kitchen on behalf of We Care.

Exalted Ruler Spencer Campbell of the South Haven Elks Lodge presents a Gratitude Grant check of $3,500 to the Director of the South Haven First Congregational Church Food Pantry Don Kitchen.

SH Elks Lodge gives back to community

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — South Haven Elks Lodge #1509 recently awarded two grants to support local projects in the South Haven community.

According to a news release, the grants were awarded to the First Congregational Church food pantry and We Care.

The Gratitude Grant check in the amount of $3,500 was given to the food pantry.

"Part of the Elks National Foundation's Community Investments Program, Gratitude Grants support local projects that help meet immediate community needs," the release stated.

The Beacon Grant check in the amount of $6,000 was awarded to We Care.

"The grant supports service projects that provide direct assistance to local families and fund Lodge-driven initiatives addressing homelessness, hunger and basic necessities," the release stated.

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Floyd Decker, Manager

If interested in including your business here contact freid@thehp.com

SOUTH HAVEN COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Ongoing events

Visually impaired and blind persons support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of the month at 1 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County.

Dementia and Alzheimer's caregivers support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church library.

Three Blondes Brewing: Trivia night on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Sparkle and Spice Boutique: Mom and Me play date. Fridays from 9-10 a.m.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for adults from 6-8 p.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Artists of any level can bring their own projects to work on. Basic art supplies will be available. Attendees must be 18 years old and over. Members are free, non-members cost $5.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for ages 9 to 13 from 4-5:30 p.m. every Wednesday. Young artists are invited to create art at their own pace with an instructor to help guide as needed. Free workshop but a $10 donation is suggested to help cover cost of supplies.

Candlelight Yoga: Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. at the Church of Epiphany. Cost is $15.

Food pantry: First Congregational Church open from 10 a.m. to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. It is a drive-up food pantry.

Food pantry: Sacred Heart Catholic Church. For Bangor residents only. Open from 1 to 4 p.m. on Thursdays.

Food, clothing, baby pantry: Lily of the Valley Church in Covert. Open from noon to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Personal care and clothing pantry: First Assembly of God open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Peace Lutheran Church open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Simpson United Methodist Church in Bangor. Open from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays. Must call the central office to register.

South Haven Memorial Library: Story Time on 11 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays through May 26, 2026.

HawksHead: Pasta on the Patio every Wednesday at 5 p.m.

Michigan Maritime Museum: Hands-on the Harbor every Thursday at 10:30 a.m.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: "The Story of Snow" by Mark Cassino and John Nelson Ph.D. Storywalk. The museum is now closed but appointments can be scheduled by calling the museum.

Lakeside Social Bowling Alley: Glow Bowl every Friday from noon to 9 p.m.

Bridge: Chicago Scoring at 1 p.m. on Tuesdays at Lakeside Social, 9921 Blue Star Memorial Highway, South Haven.

Bridge: Duplicate Scoring at 1 p.m. on Wednesdays at Lakeside Social, 9921 Blue Star Memorial Highway, South Haven.

Michigan Maritime Museum: free admission on the first Sunday of every month from November through April.

First United Methodist Church: Free meals every Tuesday night. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Meal is served at 6 p.m.

Lake Michigan College South Haven Campus: Technology Help Workshops from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. every Thursday through Dec. 11.

December

21 – South Haven Performance Series: Choral ensemble Vox GR to perform at 4 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church.

22 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

29 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

31 – New Years Eve Celebration: Downtown South Haven.

January

2 – South Haven Memorial Library: Play-doh play date at 11 a.m.

5 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

6 – Basketball: Girls freshman basketball against Hartford Public Schools at 4 p.m.

6 – Basketball: Girls junior varsity basketball against Climax-Scotts High School at 5:30 p.m.

6 – Basketball: Girls varsity basketball against Climax-Scotts High School at 7 p.m.

7 – Basketball: Boys freshman basketball against Brandywine Senior High School at 4 p.m.

7 – Basketball: Boys junior varsity basketball against Brandywine Senior High School at 5:30 p.m.

7 – Basketball: Boys varsity basketball against Brandywine Senior High School at 7 p.m.

9 – Basketball: Boys freshman basketball against Benton Harbor High School at 4 p.m.

9 – Basketball: Boys junior varsity basketball against Bridgman Public School at 5:30 p.m.

9 – Basketball: Boys varsity basketball against Bridgman Public School at 7 p.m.

12 – Basketball: Boys freshman basketball against Michigan Lutheran High School at 4 p.m.

12 – Basketball: Boys junior varsity basketball against Buchanan High School at 5:30 p.m.

12 – Basketball: Boys varsity basketball against Buchanan High School at 5:30 p.m.

13 – Swimming: Boys varsity swimming against Hastings High School at 6 p.m.

14 – Bowling: Boys and girls varsity bowling against Allegan Public Schools at 4 p.m.

15 – Basketball: Boys freshman basketball against Allegan Public Schools at 4 p.m.

15 – Basketball: Girls junior varsity basketball against Allegan Public Schools at 5:30 p.m.

15 – Basketball: Boys junior varsity basketball against Allegan Public Schools at 7 p.m.

16 – South Haven Memorial Library: Messy Play for preschoolers from 11 a.m. to noon.

19 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

20 – Basketball: Boys freshman basketball against Hastings High School at 4 p.m.

20 – Basketball: Girls middle school basketball against Saugatuck High School at 5 p.m.

20 – Basketball: Boys junior varsity basketball against Black River Public School at 5:30 p.m.

20 – Basketball: Boys varsity basketball against Black River Public School at 7 p.m.

20 – Swimming: Boys varsity swimming against Allegan Public School at 6 p.m.

21 – Wrestling: Boys and Girls varsity wrestling at 6 p.m.

22 – Basketball: Boys freshman basketball against Watervliet High School at 4 p.m.

22 – Basketball: Girls junior varsity basketball against Watervliet High School at 5:30 p.m.

22 – Basketball: Boys junior varsity basketball against Watervliet High School at 7 p.m.

22 – Bowling: Boys and girls varsity bowling against Parchment High School at 4 p.m.

24 – South Haven Memorial Library: Astronomy Club fro kids starting at 11 a.m.

26 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

27 – Wrestling: Boys and girls varsity wrestling at 6 p.m.

28 – Basketball: Girls middle school basketball against Black River Public School at 4 p.m.

28 – Basketball: Girls freshman basketball against Zeeland West High School at 4 p.m.

28 – Basketball: Girls junior varsity basketball against Zeeland West High School at 5:30 p.m.

28 – Basketball: Girls varsity basketball against Zeeland West High School at 7 p.m.

28 – Bowling: Boys and girls bowling against Martin Public School at 4 p.m.

29 – Basketball: Girls middle school basketball against Lakeshore High School at 5:30 p.m. All-area tournament.

30 – Girls varsity basketball against Coloma High School: 6 p.m.

30 – Boys varsity basketball against Coloma High School: 7:30 p.m.

Photo provided / Tom Renner

Emily Thomas, 130 pounds, pinning her Unity Christian opponent the annual invitational hosted by South Haven High School with 10 teams participating in boys and girls competition.

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Lower-cost space missions like NASA's ESCAPADE are starting to deliver exciting science – but at a price in risk and trade-offs

By ARI KOEPPEL
Earth Sciences Postdoctoral Scientist and Adjunct Associate, Dartmouth College (The Conversation)

After a yearslong series of setbacks, NASA's Escape and Plasma Acceleration and Dynamics Explorers, or ESCAPADE, mission has finally begun its roundabout journey to Mars.

Launched on Nov. 13, 2025, aboard Blue Origin's New Glenn rocket, ESCAPADE's twin probes will map the planet's magnetic field and study how the solar wind – the stream of charged particles released from the Sun – has stripped away the Martian atmosphere over billions of years.

When I was a doctoral student, I helped develop the VISIONS camera systems onboard each of ESCAPADE's spacecraft, so I was especially excited to see the successful launch.

But this low-cost mission is still only getting started, and it's taking bigger risks than typical big-ticket NASA missions.

ESCAPADE is part of NASA's Small Innovative Missions for Planetary Exploration, or SIMPLEx, program that funds low-cost, higher-risk projects. Of the five SIMPLEx missions selected so far, three have failed after launch due to equipment problems that might have been caught in more traditional, tightly managed programs. A fourth sits in indefinite storage.

ESCAPADE will not begin returning science data for about 30 months, and the program's history suggests the odds are not entirely in its favor. Nonetheless, the calculus goes that if enough of these missions are successful, NASA can achieve valuable science at a reduced cost – even with some losses along the way.

Lower cost, higher risk

NASA classifies payloads on a four-tier risk scale, from A to D.

Class A missions are the most expensive and highest priority, like the James Webb Space Telescope, Europa Clipper and the Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope. They use thoroughly proven hardware and undergo exhaustive testing.

ESCAPADE is at the other end. It's a class D mission, defined as having "high risk tolerance" and "medium to low complexity."

Of the 21 class D missions that have launched since the designation was first applied in 2009, NASA has not had a single class D mission launch on schedule. Only four remained under budget. Four were canceled outright prior to launch.

ESCAPADE, which will have cost an estimated US$94.2 million by the end of its science operations in 2029, has stayed under the $100 million mark through a series of cost-saving choices. It has a small set of key instruments, a low spacecraft mass to reduce launch costs, and extensively uses generic commercial components instead of custom hardware.

NASA also outsourced to private companies: Much of the spacecraft development went to Rocket Lab and the trajectory design to Advanced Space LLC, with tight contract limits to make sure the contractors didn't go over budget.

Additional savings came from creative arrangements, including the university-funded VISIONS camera package and a discounted ride on New Glenn, which Blue Origin wanted to fly anyway for its own testing objectives.

Commercial space

ESCAPADE launched at a moment of transition in space science.

NASA and other science agencies are facing the steepest budget pressures in more than 60 years, with political winds shifting funding toward human spaceflight. At the same time, the commercial space sector is booming, with long-imagined technologies that enable cheap space travel finally entering service.

That boom has, in part, led to a resurgence in NASA's "faster, better, cheaper" push that originated in the 1980s and '90s – and which largely faded after the 2003 Columbia disaster.

In theory, leaner NASA oversight, greater use of off-the-shelf hardware and narrower science goals can cut costs while launching more missions and increasing the total science return. If ESCAPADE succeeds in delivering important science, it will be held up as evidence that this more commercial, risk-tolerant template can deliver.

The trade-offs

A concept put forward by Jared Isaacman, the Trump administration's nominee to lead NASA, is that 10 $100 million missions would be better than one $1 billion flagship – or top-tier – mission. This approach could encourage faster mission development and would diversify the types of missions heading out into the solar system.

But that reorganization comes with trade-offs. For example, low-cost missions rarely match flagship missions in scope, and they typically do less to advance the technology necessary for doing innovative science.

With a narrow scope, missions like ESCAPADE are unlikely to produce the most transformative discoveries about, for instance, the origins of life or the nature of dark matter, or the first chemical analyses of oceans on a new world. Instead, they focus on more specific questions.

Early in ESCAPADE's development, my role was to help create a planning document for the VISIONS cameras called the Science Traceability Matrix, which defines an instrument's scientific goals and translates them into concrete measurement requirements.

My colleagues and I systematically asked: What do we want to learn? What observations prove it? And, critically, how precisely does the instrument need to work to be "good enough," given the budget? Loftier goals usually demand more complex instruments and operations, which drive up costs.

ESCAPADE's broader goals are to create a clearer picture of Mars' magnetic field, how the solar wind interacts with it, and figure out what that process does to Mars' atmosphere. That is valuable science. But it is more modest than the $583 million predecessor mission MAVEN's more extensive scope and richer suite of instruments. It was MAVEN that determined how and when Mars lost its once-dense atmosphere in the first place.

Both ESCAPADE and MAVEN are dwarfed again by the open-ended potential of an operation like the James Webb Space Telescope, which observes a limitless slate of astronomical objects in the infrared light spectrum with a higher resolution than any combination of prior smaller telescopes.

Flagship missions like the James Webb Space Telescope push the state of the art in new technologies and materials. These innovations then filter into both future missions and everyday life. For example, the Webb telescope advanced the medical tools used in eye exams. Smaller missions rely more heavily on existing, mature technologies.

And when systems are built by private companies rather than NASA, those companies keep tight control over the patents rather than openly spreading the technology across the scientific community.

A tense road to launch

ESCAPADE's principal investigator, Rob Lillis, has joked that it is the mission with 11 lives, having survived 11 near-cancellations. Problems ranged from being late in reaching the technology readiness levels that helped ensure the probes wouldn't malfunction after launch, to the loss of its original free ride, with NASA's Psyche mission.

In 2024, ESCAPADE received support from NASA to ride on New Glenn's maiden flight, only to face delays as Blue Origin worked through technical hurdles. At last, in October 2025, ESCAPADE reached the launchpad.

I traveled to Cape Canaveral for the launch and felt the tension firsthand. The first window was scrubbed by bad weather and issues with ground equipment. Then a strong solar storm – ironically, a key driver of the very processes ESCAPADE will study – shut down the second window.

Concurrently, the Federal Aviation Administration imposed new launch restrictions due to the government shutdown that would have postponed the launch further if not for a last-minute exemption.

Finally, on Nov. 13, after repeated setbacks, New Glenn lifted off to cheers around the country. ESCAPADE reached orbit, and after a nervous few hours of receiver misalignment, mission controllers established communication with the spacecraft.

What's next

While in Florida, I also watched another milestone in commercial spaceflight: the record-breaking 94th launch from Cape Canaveral in 2025, marking the most launches from Florida in a single year. It was a SpaceX Falcon 9 carrying Starlink satellites.

Like New Glenn, SpaceX's Falcon 9 saves money by landing and reusing rockets. If multiple providers like SpaceX and Blue Origin compete to keep launch prices low, the economics of small science missions will only improve.

If ESCAPADE's twin spacecraft reach Mars and deliver new insights as planned, they will demonstrate how minimalist, commercial-forward approaches can expand the planetary knowledge base.

But even then, a string of future SIMPLEx successes would likely not be a substitute for the uniquely capable, technology-advancing flagship missions that answer the most far-reaching questions. ESCAPADE can instead help test whether a broader mix of small missions – leaning on commercial partners and a few big, ambitious flagships – can together sustain planetary science in an era of tight budgets.

For now, that balance remains an open experiment, and only time will tell whether ESCAPADE is a lone bright spot or the start of a real shift.

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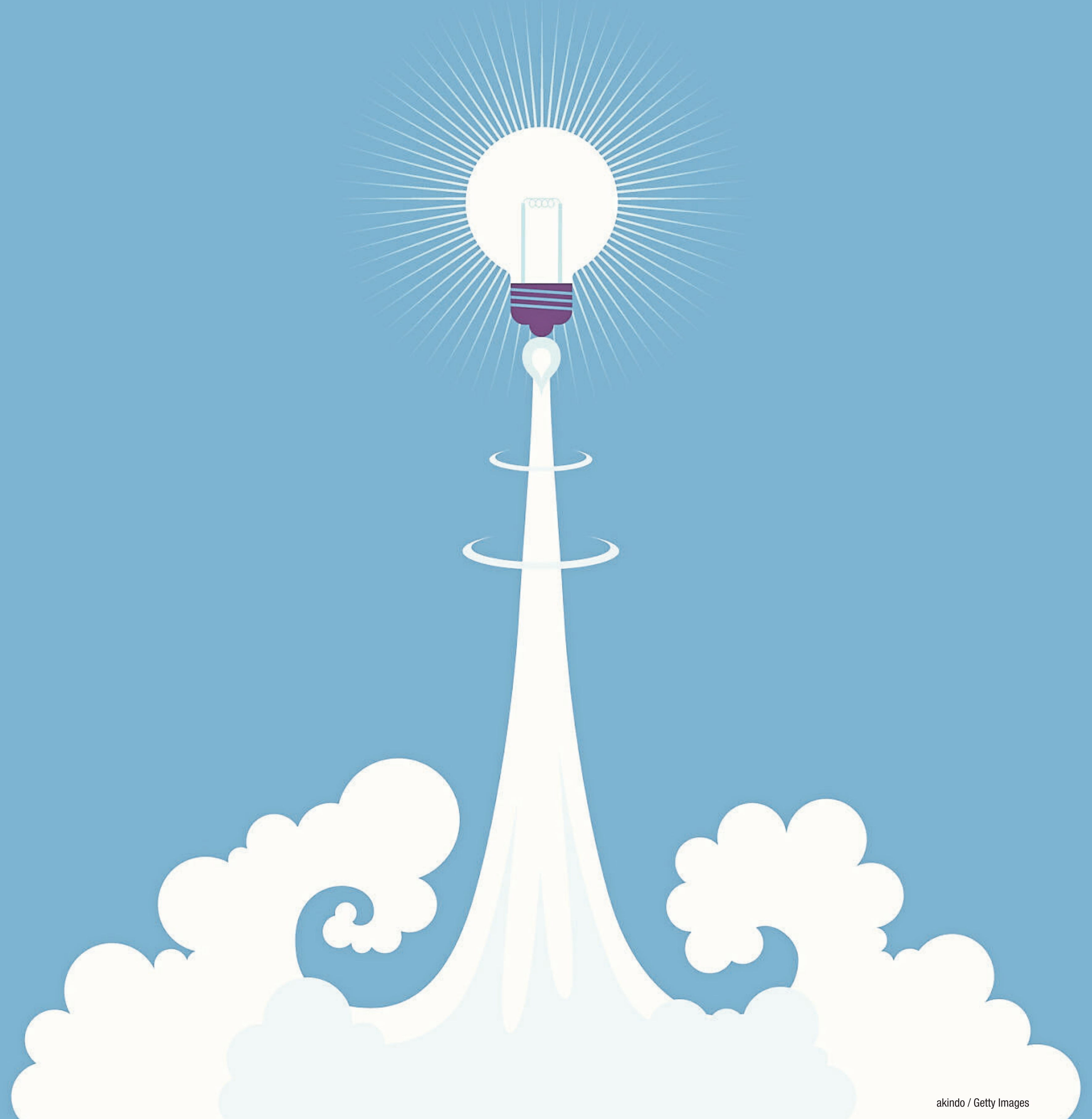

akindo / Getty Images

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Photos by Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune / TNS

Cassandra Martinez and her daughter Catalina, 4, run the table while people make holiday cards for families impacted by recent ICE actions as part of the Operation Midway Bliss community project Sunday, Nov. 30, 2025, at Pink Flores Bakery & Cafe in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood.

Operation Midway Bliss redefines blitz with gift drive for families affected by immigration enforcement

By LAURA TURBAY
Chicago Tribune (TNS)

CHICAGO — William McNiff has been a vocal critic of the recent immigration crackdown in Chicago on his TikTok profile. So when he heard about the Salvation Army's Angel Tree program, which provides gifts for children and families in need, he wondered if he could do something similar for children of immigrant families affected by Operation Midway Blitz in the city.

In less than a week, McNiff and his friend Taylor Krahl raised over $10,000 on their GoFundMe page to buy gifts and groceries for families in the Chicago area. McNiff helped spread the word about the project on his TikTok account, which has over 41,000 followers.

The gift haul was coined Operation Midway Bliss as a way to reclaim the name from the federal government's Operation Midway Blitz, which wreaked havoc on the city's immigrant community.

"When I saw those Angel Trees blowing up (on social media)," said McNiff, who lives in the Gold Coast, "an idea sparked of something I can do for my neighbors here in Chicago, aside from just yapping on TikTok or going to a protest, something that can actually have an impact directly."

The pair is working with Organización Hijos de Migrantes to distribute a gift and an essential item, such as a coat, to about 170 children from 100 families impacted by immigration enforcement in the Chicago area and Aurora that were selected on a first-come, first-served basis, according to Sheila Jara, the organization's founder. The gifts and items, which are chosen from an Amazon Wish List based on the families' interests, are scheduled to be shipped out to children up to age 18 starting soon.

In addition to the gifts, each family will receive about $50 worth of groceries from tortillas to toilet paper delivered right to their doorstep, since many still do not want to leave their homes for fear of being detained, according to Jara.

"The great part about Operation Midway Bliss is that we will have personalized bags of items that we know families will need," Jara said.

C. Verser makes a holiday card for a family impacted by recent ICE actions as part of the Operation Midway Bliss community project Nov. 30 at Pink Flores Bakery & Cafe in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood.

When Krahl, who met McNiff through TikTok last year, heard about his gift-giving plan, she immediately jumped on board. "I went into crazy business owner logistic mode," said Krahl, who co-runs her own pool business in Naperville and has seen the fallout of immigration enforcement in her community.

She helped come up with the name: Operation Midway Bliss.

Krahl wanted to "take back" the name that "brought so much stress and horror" to immigrant communities and turn it into something joyful for those very same people.

"And kind of like a 'ha-ha' to your name," Krahl said.

The stated goal of the Trump administration's immigration crackdown was to target "the worst of the worst." The two-month operation, which began Sept. 8, led to hundreds of contentious arrests in neighborhoods across the city and suburbs.

Newly released federal data shows that immigration agents detained roughly 1,900 immigrants in the first half of the operation, and that two-thirds of whom had no known criminal convictions or pending charges.

Several high-profile confrontations with agents sparked citywide outrage from residents, who began mobilizing to warn about suspected ICE sightings with whistles around their necks. Others held protests outside the Broadview detention center that drew multiple arrests and at times prompted agents to disperse tear gas.

Conversely, Operation Midway Bliss' mission is to support children in the Chicago area. "We believe no human is illegal, and every child deserves to feel safe, valued, and loved – especially during the holiday season," the website states.

Over 800 people signed up to volunteer or donate to Operation Midway Bliss, including Doreen Sayegh, a theater producer at Pemberley Productions in Chicago.

Sayegh had been a part of Whistlemania groups in September, helping to distribute whistle kits to warn immigrants as enforcement ramped up, and found the organized mobilization "kind of amazing."

When she heard about Operation Midway Bliss on social media, she reached out about making handwritten cards for the families as part of the gift-giving. "They were really excited and thought that would go nicely," Sayegh said.

Together with about 30 volunteers from Sayegh's Whistlemania network and the Midway Bliss team, she is aiming to write 500 cards, two or three for each family.

In small get-togethers across the city, she and other volunteers plan to sit down and write "messages of hope or messages of community with neighbors and families that have gone through something so horrific."

Many cards will be written in English on one side and translated into Spanish on the other, since many of the families receiving gifts only speak Spanish, said Jara and Sayegh.

On Sunday, a group of volunteers gathered at Pink Flores Bakery and Cafe in Pilsen to make handwritten holiday cards. Nearly two dozen cards resembling Christmas trees, Snoopy and golden butterflies were crafted, according to Cassandra Martinez, who helped organize the card writing event.

Martinez, who grew up in Little Village and works at a nonprofit in the area, said immigration enforcement left a "lingering impact" within families. When she came across Operation Midway Bliss, she decided to volunteer.

The Bliss team aims to grow the project's reach. "We just both had this feeling, I guess it's more of a hope that it would perform this way," said Krahl. Operation Midway Bliss' GoFundMe has raised over $12,500 since it launched Nov. 20, and over $8,000 of that was raised in the first day.

For McNiff, the project is also about letting immigrant families know that Chicagoans have their backs.

"I want them to know and have a little hope that people are still fighting for them, and know that they're a valuable human being, first and foremost, but they are also valuable to America and the dream of America," McNiff said.

One night, Krahl and McNiff were texting late about Operation Midway Bliss.

"I was like 'I think I'm gonna cry tonight,' and he goes, 'I think I might cry soon,'" said Krahl, recalling the conversation.

"I said: 'Are we doing this?' and he goes: 'We're doing this.'"

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Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times / TNS

Derrek Miranda, who documents the lives of the downtrodden in downtown L.A. and posts motorcycle stunt videos online under the name Whitewallstuntz, sits on the 6th Street bridge on Nov. 23 in Los Angeles, California.

Stunt bike influencer takes followers *'behind the tent zipper'* in LA encampments

By **CHRISTOPHER BUCHANAN**
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Derrek Miranda pops a wheelie on his motorbike on the 6th Street bridge in Los Angeles, California on Nov. 23.

LOS ANGELES — Traveling near the Warehouse District with Derrek Miranda is akin to riding in a motorcade with an elected official.

Under the moniker Whitewallstuntz, Miranda has carved out a name for himself in downtown Los Angeles. On social media, he can be seen cutting through the most downtrodden parts of Skid Row on his white and neon green Honda Grom minibike, almost always in search of a subject to document.

He has amassed nearly 300,000 followers across TikTok, Instagram and Facebook. He can be seen letting sparks fly from his tail scraper on the 10 Freeway with a "Los Angeles" tattoo emblazoned across his back, chopping it up with LAPD officers or, most commonly, touring homeless encampments to show, as he puts it, "what real life in L.A. is like."

"A lot of people are scared of these human beings because they look at them like they're zombies or something," Miranda said. "A lot of these people just have a story they want to tell, or they want to talk about, and not a lot of people want to hear them out."

Miranda fashions himself equal parts good Samaritan, stuntman and documentary filmmaker. He produces his own short-form videos, feeding an internet audience hungry for unfiltered views of L.A.'s underbelly.

He is among a growing wave of influencers who create content that toes a fine line between advocacy and exploitation.

Miranda has documented a litany of drug trades in broad daylight, whooped as he recorded violent altercations between homeless individuals that he later titled "Bum Fights" and coaxed sex workers into a brief thrill by taking them on the back of his bike while popping wheelies.

But he has also engaged in thoughtful conversation with those who usually go unheard and unseen. He provides resources like clothing or food at a more intimate level than a contracted social services worker. He has personally delivered Narcan to help some recover from the brink of overdose in multiple videos.

"I want to show the reality of life, not only behind a closed door, curtains and, you know, a chandelier when you walk in," Miranda said. "I want to show behind the tent zipper … It just shows real life, how these people still be human beings and live like an animal."

Miranda was born in Long Beach and raised in East Compton. For years, he said, he was primarily employed as a private hibachi chef and rode bikes as a hobby. He said he was struck by a van during immigration protests in June, which put him out of work temporarily. It turned into a permanent leave after his pages started to gain traction.

Since then, he has lived in a camper van while pushing out near-daily content on his page that is occasionally licensed by mainstream TV news organizations – the bulk of his current income.

As Miranda made his rounds on a recent evening downtown, subjects of past videos on his page popped out of their sidewalk encampments to catch up.

"I've known him for what feels like all my life, but it's been about three years," said Alvin Jones, 32, who lives in an encampment on 5th Street and Stanford Avenue. "He's telling stories about people out here, who don't really have a shot at getting their stories heard very often."

Although Miranda has admirers on the street, there are also detractors who believe his content can be harmful to the homeless community.

"Dont praise/normalize this kind of living," one comment read on a video titled "Tent Tour."

"Take this s--- down why would you even record this bro," another read on a video of Miranda in conversation with a homeless person.

Miranda recognizes the "controversial" nature of his work, but views it as an effort to be transparent about what life is like for the city's most marginalized residents.

He is openly critical of state and city policy and said he believes more can be done by officials to ease the burden on a vulnerable homeless population.

"Most of the time they just put people into a housing complex where there's a bunch of different people in one room," he said. "You get a bed, but then what happens is everyone starts fighting with each other, taking stuff. It doesn't really make anything better."

Another account, Street People of Los Angeles, claims to have had more than 700,000 Instagram followers before being suspended by the platform. A replacement has already sprung up, with tens of thousands of people tuning in for gritty videos of squalor and street life.

One of Miranda's close friends, Brandon Castro – who goes by Brandonexploredthis on Instagram, where he makes videos touring abandoned buildings – said Miranda's work extends into direct advocacy for his subjects. The two once reunited a missing homeless individual with his sister in Redding after one of their joint posts went viral, Castro said.

"I think some people take it the wrong way sometimes seeing someone post another struggling, but I've seen it help so many people and give so much encouragement and confidence," Castro said.

Miranda's supporters argue his work comes from a place of compassion, in the same vein as one TikToker who surprises day laborers and street vendors with free trips to Disneyland, then posts footage of their jubilant experiences to a global audience.

Miranda said both of his parents experienced addiction, and his refuge in childhood came from riding motorcycles – a passion that has followed him into adulthood and onto his page.

After the Dodgers World Series parade downtown, he was recorded engaging in a brief takeover at the intersection of Hope and 8th streets with other motorcyclists. Standing with one foot on the right peg of his bike in a half-pirouette, Miranda mimed pumping his other foot across the pavement as if propelling a scooter. Officers arrived to disperse the crowd soon after.

LAPD officers mingle with and check in on Miranda often, he said, but some of his activities seem to run counter to the department's years-long attempts to decrease takeover-style gatherings.

In a news conference in August, L.A. District Attorney Nathan Hochman addressed a growing issue of dangerous street takeovers – usually involving cars or trucks – that he said have been "plaguing and ravaging communities for years."

"If you engage in destructive, dangerous or ultimately deadly conduct and if you're a promoter, don't even think for a second you can hide anymore," Hochman said. "We're coming after you."

Miranda denied that he'd put anyone in danger on his bike. He said his more rambunctious activities – including videos of stunt maneuvers on the highways that attract a healthy viewership – are simply a therapeutic means of relief from the exhaustive woes of homelessness that plague both him and his subjects.

"I feel free and at peace on the bike," Miranda said. "It's like I can go anywhere, like the city is a big playground for me."

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In its time left, this prison is experimenting with a new housing model

Alex Kormann / The Minnesota Star Tribune / TNS

Inside Cell Hall A-East at Stillwater prison in Bayport, inmates move freely and also are allowed to pursue more interests. Staff said there are fewer disciplinary actions; inmates say the rhythm is different and there is more opportunity.

By EMMY MARTIN and NATHANIEL MINOR
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

BAYPORT, Minn. — The B-East cell hall at Stillwater prison was once a place of echoing lockdowns and razor-edged tension.

"Some things that'll never leave," said Lt. Sam Marks, recalling the stabbings, self-harm and overdoses that reverberated through the four tiers of steel and concrete.

But since the Department of Corrections began the process of closing the prison this fall, an experiment has taken root in the newly opened space.

Inside, incarcerated people tend herb gardens, line up for "shape-ups" in a resident-run barbershop, debate books in a discussion group, and help run a prison tattoo shop.

The transformed space is an "earned living unit," or ELU, that trades privileges for accountability. Since the unit opened about two months ago, multiple staff and residents said, the unit has not faced a lockdown.

"The interaction between inmates and the staff has changed, a complete 180," Marks said. "We're building something together."

DOC Commissioner Paul Schnell said the department will use Stillwater's remaining years to refine the ELU model here and expand it to other facilities. A parallel unit at Faribault prison launched around the same time.

What the unit looks like – and how it works

The ELU sits inside Stillwater's historic cellblocks, but the daily rhythm is different. Men move freely between units, work, the gym and other spaces during the day, residents said. The old black line in the middle of the main corridor – which incarcerated people were once forbidden to cross – is gone.

The unit offers "more freedom, more movement, more opportunity and access to other commissary options," Schnell said. Eligibility is based on an application and past behavior.

Most cells are single-occupancy; some residents receive a second cell for study or projects. The block now includes air fryers, pizza ovens, weight equipment, video games and hobby spaces.

Damon DiMartino, 50, convicted of promoting prostitution, said he spends much of his time in that spare cell, where he grows peppers and four types of basil under lights. He used to sneak dandelions and other weeds from the yard back to his cell to grow and was punished for it.

Thanh Tran makes a call from an inmate accessible phone at Minnesota Correctional Facility – Stillwater in Bayport, Minnesota, on Nov. 20.

"I can't believe they're letting us do this," he said as he tended to plants. DiMartino and other inmates use the herbs in homemade lasagna and pizza.

"When there's nothing to do, I just kind of sit in here for a moment," DiMartino said. "This is about as free as I'm going to get for a while – a few more years anyway."

Incarcerated people can also decorate their cells as they wish. Brandon Cox, 39, who is serving a life sentence for a conviction of first-degree murder, asked tattoo artist Daniel Gonzalez to paint murals on his walls, including one of his son.

Inmates described town halls, unit mission statements and shared standards that, staff said, are sometimes "more robust" than DOC rules.

The climate shift has been immediate.

"Being here for almost two months and never seeing a fight," Cox said. "You can't be in prison and experience that. It shows that the guys are really here for the program, and the guys are really here to better themselves and uplift everybody."

Keith Grube, 59, serving a life sentence for first-degree murder, has cycled through Rush City, Moose Lake and Lino Lakes. He called Stillwater's ELU "hands down" the best.

"This is a prison only if you want to act like a prisoner," he said. "If you want to act like this is a community, then this is a community."

Questions as transfers ripple across the system

Staff and residents acknowledged the human side of Stillwater's transition – friends transferred statewide, programs paused, longtime officers reassigned.

And also a recurring concern: whether concentrating highly motivated residents in the Stillwater ELU and transferring out "heavy hitters," as Marks described it, pushes troubled dynamics elsewhere in the state. The Stillwater units before the changes shifted prisoners averaged a lockdown a quarter, the DOC said.

The DOC transferred 262 people from Stillwater to Rush City, now operating at about 94 percent capacity, according to DOC data. Overcrowding can increase violence, Schnell said, citing the recent death of Stephen Washington after an alleged altercation with his cellmate and the August assault of four correctional officers at Rush City.

Schnell said the department is tracking incidents closely but emphasized that the ELU is built around risk-based placement, not displacement.

Inmates must apply to the unit. In the two months since they opened, three inmates at Stillwater and three in Faribault have been removed from the units, according to the DOC.

So far, he said, DOC has found no evidence that Stillwater's phased closure has caused new violence at other prisons.

"The reality is, anytime you have higher populations, higher numbers of people, you're going to have an increase in problems," Schnell said.

He said he remains confident prisons are adequately staffed. Staffing levels across the entire system are higher now than in 2019, when the prison population was more than 1,000 people larger.

A tattoo parlor and barber shop

The self-governance ethos extends to programs that inmates built themselves, which are now part of the ELU.

Stillwater's two-year-old tattoo program operates like an outside apprenticeship, overseen by a full-time DOC administrator. Apprentices practice on synthetic skin, complete sanitation courses and test for licensure through the Minnesota Department of Health.

Two early apprentices paroled this year and were hired as tattoo artists right away, staff member Justin Jiminez said. One placed second at a tattoo convention.

Licenses for the two artists, Daniel Gonzalez, 28, and Courtney Ocegueda, 29, hang on the wall. Practice skins show crisp linework and color studies. Staff say DOC-permitted tattooing reduces hepatitis transmission behind bars.

In a chair, Gonzalez – serving time for second-degree murder and assault – layered color into a multi-session dragon tattoo across Matthew Fahey's back. Fahey, 40, imprisoned for first-degree criminal sexual conduct, criminal sexual predatory conduct and kidnapping, sat patiently through his fifth session.

"I've always wanted to be a tattoo artist, but I never thought it was possible," Gonzalez said. "Sometimes it can be expensive."

Residents also built a barbershop they named Street Cuts. Joe Soltis, 69, serving a life sentence for first-degree murder, had pushed for a shop for decades. After the ELU launched, residents converted part of a recreation room into a full-service barbershop, complete with graffiti lettering and paint-splatter floors.

Soltis hopes the unit will eventually start an accredited barber school.

What's changed systemwide – and what hasn't

Earlier this year, the Legislature ordered Stillwater to close by June 2029. Already, 60 percent of Stillwater's population has been transferred, and the remaining inmates are in the ELU, substance abuse or restrictive housing units.

Schnell said the Stillwater closing so far has met budget targets, with total cuts reaching $48 million by 2029. The 111-year-old facility has an estimated $180 million in deferred maintenance.

Schnell said the prison population statewide is about 8,300, down from about 10,000 in 2019, allowing the DOC to absorb Stillwater's residents.

Planned capacity at Stillwater during the wind-down is about 550, down from roughly 1,180 before the closure decision.

Long-term, DOC is considering expansions at other prisons and may seek bonding for improvements at St. Cloud, which has significant infrastructure needs.

Incentive-based programs in Maine and Missouri inspired the ELU. Maine officials report declines in assaults and disciplinary actions after adopting similar models.

A decommissioning study is underway to determine Stillwater's future. Parts of the site are on the National Register of Historic Places; many shuttered prisons nationally have been converted to mixed-use housing, Schnell noted, though any reuse project would need to resolve matters of hazardous materials and active bonds.

Inside Stillwater, residents say the transformation is already tangible.

"The vibe's a lot better," said Henry Patterson, 51, serving a life sentence for first-degree murder, who works in the barbershop. "It isn't as stressful – and they let you be a man."

HEALTH

THE CONVERSATION

Sugar starts corroding your teeth within seconds – here's how to protect your pearly whites from decay

Daniil Dubov / Getty Images

By JOSÉ LEMOS and JACQUELINE ABRANCHES
University of Florida (The Conversation)

Between Halloween candy, Thanksgiving pies and holiday cookies, the end of the year is often packed with opportunities to consume sugar. But what happens in your mouth during those first minutes and hours after eating those sweets?

While you're likely aware that eating too much sugar can cause cavities – that is, damage to your teeth – you might be less familiar with how bacteria use those sugars to build a sticky film called plaque on your teeth as soon as you take that first sweet bite.

We are a team of microbiologists that studies how oral bacteria cause tooth decay. Here's what happens in your mouth the moment sugar passes your lips – and how to protect your teeth:

An acid plunge

Within seconds of your first bite or sip of something sugary, the bacteria that make the human mouth their home start using those dietary sugars to grow and multiply. In the process of converting those sugars into energy, these bacteria produce large quantities of acids. As a result, just a minute or two after consuming high-sugar foods or drinks, the acidity of your mouth increases into levels that can dissolve enamel – that is, the minerals making up the surface of your teeth.

Luckily, saliva comes to the rescue before these acids can start corroding the surface of your teeth. It washes away excess sugars while also neutralizing the acids in your mouth.

Your mouth is also home to other bacteria that compete with cavity-causing bacteria for resources and space, fighting them off and restoring the acidity of your mouth to levels that aren't harmful to teeth.

However, frequent consumption of sweets and sugary drinks can overfeed harmful bacteria in a way that neither saliva nor helpful bacteria can overcome.

An assault on enamel

Cavity-causing bacteria also use dietary sugars to make a sticky layer called a biofilm that acts like a fortress attached to the teeth. Biofilms are very hard to remove without mechanical force, such as from routinely brushing your teeth or cleaning at the dentist's office.

In addition, biofilms impose a physical barrier that restricts what crosses its border, such that saliva can no longer do its job of neutralizing acid as well. To make matters worse, while cavity-causing bacteria are able to survive in these acidic conditions, the good bacteria fighting them cannot.

In these protected fortresses, cavity-causing bacteria are able to keep multiplying, keeping the acidity level of the mouth elevated and leading to further loss of tooth minerals until a cavity becomes visible or painful.

How to protect your (sweet) teeth

Before eating your next sugary treat, there are a few measures you can take to help keep the cavity-forming bacteria at bay and your teeth safe.

First, try to reduce the amount of sugar you eat and consume your sugary food or drink during a meal. This way, the increased saliva production that occurs while eating can help wash away sugars and neutralize acids in your mouth.

In addition, avoid snacking on sweets and sugary drinks throughout the day, especially those containing table sugar or high-fructose corn syrup. Continually exposing your mouth to sugar will keep its acidity level higher for longer periods of time.

Finally, remember to brush regularly, especially after meals, to remove as much dental plaque as possible. Daily flossing also helps remove plaque from areas that your toothbrush cannot reach.

José Lemos is a professor of oral biology and Jacqueline Abranches is an associate professor of oral biology at the University of Florida. The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts. This article is republished under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article at https://theconversation.com.

MAYO CLINIC Q&A

Managing grief during the holiday season

By MAYO CLINIC NEWS NETWORK (TNS)

DEAR MAYO CLINIC: In the past few years, my mom passed away, and I lost a dear friend. The holidays were always a special time for us. Since their deaths, the holidays are really hard. Do you have any suggestions for managing this grief?

ANSWER: The holiday season can be especially challenging if you're mourning the death of someone close to you. Whether it was a recent loss or one that occurred some time ago, feelings of grief can be heightened and may seem overwhelming during the holiday season.

This is the time of year known for traditions and togetherness with family and friends, yet you may face challenges in how you celebrate and gather. Understanding how grief affects you, having conversations about plans with those close to you, and finding ways to remember your loved ones can help restore a sense of balance. These choices also can help you navigate through rough spots and find warmth in special, unexpected places.

Experiencing grief emotionally, physically

Grief and bereavement are universal human responses to loss. How each person processes their symptoms and reactions varies greatly. Because all people are different, how and when those feelings surface are also different. There's no predictable timetable or pattern.

While you may feel it on an emotional level or in your everyday activities or relationships, grief also can have physical effects. These can include:

- Tiring more easily or low energy.
- Having trouble eating or sleeping.
- Seeming more susceptible to headaches and other illnesses.
- Having trouble concentrating or focusing.
- Having low tolerance.

You're not imagining these reactions. They're real.

Some of what you're experiencing may include responses that don't feel socially acceptable.

You might find that tears come easily in unexpected places or you can't cry – the tears just won't come. You might feel so down or exhausted that you have trouble just getting out of bed or off the sofa. You might realize that the coping responses you've developed might not be the healthiest.

The important thing is to honor your process and acknowledge that this is how you respond and how you're coping. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Go at your own pace.

Seeking help to navigate the holidays

Pay close attention to your health and take good care of yourself while grieving. It's important to be gentle with yourself. Try to eat healthy foods and get enough rest.

If you're experiencing these symptoms, it's a good idea to consult with your healthcare team to ensure that all is well physically and to receive additional emotional guidance during this difficult time.

It may be beneficial to seek grief counseling or join a grief support group. Knowing that you're not alone can make a world of difference. Connecting with those who understand or are going through a similar situation can provide new perspectives and affirm that what you're going through is normal.

Sharing stories among family and friends, making favorite foods, looking at photographs of happy times, or other activities may help you find connection. But pay attention to whether this helps or becomes too much to handle. Let your feelings be your guide. Finding the path to navigate through all the season's activities may provide a sense of empowerment.

You're grieving because you've loved, have been loved and continue to love. An important part of your healing this holiday season may be to embrace the love and memories you've shared with your loved ones.

Wishing you peace through the holiday season.

– Jessie Wolf, Psychiatry and Psychology, Mayo Clinic Health System, New Prague, Minnesota

The holiday season can be especially challenging if you're mourning the death of someone close to you.
Dreamstime / TNS

ASK THE PEDIATRICIAN

First aid for a knocked-out permanent tooth

By STUART BRADIN, DO, FAAP, FACEP
American Academy of Pediatrics (TNS)

A knocked-out tooth, often from a fall or sport injury, can be frightening for both children and parents. Knowing what to do in those first few minutes can make all the difference, especially with a permanent tooth.

If your child loses a baby tooth earlier than expected, there's no need to try to replace it. In most cases, no treatment is necessary. The adult tooth will eventually come in on its own. But if a permanent tooth comes out, it's a dental emergency that requires swift action.

Permanent teeth have the best chance of being saved when placed back in the socket within 15 minutes. You may still be able to save it within the first hour if you act quickly and carefully.

Go to the dentist or emergency room right away after following these steps:

1. Find the tooth as soon as possible. Carefully pick it up by the crown (the part you chew with) – not the root (the end that goes into the gums). Touching the root can damage delicate cells needed for reattachment.

2. Rinse the tooth gently with milk or saline solution. Do not use tap water to rinse it, and DO NOT SCRUB THE TOOTH.

3. Try to reinsert the tooth. If you feel comfortable, try to place the tooth back into its socket. Then, have your child bite down gently on a piece of gauze or cloth to hold it in place.

If you are unable to reinsert the tooth into the socket, KEEP THE TOOTH MOIST while seeking emergency care. You can place the tooth in a container with milk, saline or balanced salt solution (like Save-A-Tooth), or your child's saliva. Do not store the tooth in tap water.

After following these steps, go immediately to your child's dentist or the nearest emergency room. Let them know you're coming and that your child has a knocked-out permanent tooth.

Stuart Bradin, DO, FAAP, FACEP, is a board-certified pediatric emergency medicine physician at C.S. Mott Children's Hospital.

Autism Speaks Light it Up Blue Autism Awareness Celebration at Chicago Children's Museum on April 8, 2017, in Chicago.
Daniel Boczarski / Getty Images for Autism Speaks / TNS

Families worry as states scrutinize cost of autism therapy

By NADA HASSANEIN
Stateline.org (TNS)

State Medicaid agencies are struggling to pay for an intensive therapy for children with autism – and looming federal Medicaid cuts are likely to make the problem worse.

Parents of children and young adults who receive applied behavior analysis, or ABA, worry states' cost-saving measures will make it harder for them to get vital services. About 5 percent of children ages 3 to 17 on public insurance have autism spectrum disorder, compared with 2 percent who have private insurance, according to a CDC survey.

Many families and autism therapists say ABA can help improve communication and social skills, sharpen memory and focus, and replace challenging behaviors with positive ones. ABA therapy can range from 10 to 40 hours per week in different settings, including home and school. That makes it expensive.

In 2014, the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services mandated that all state Medicaid programs cover comprehensive autism services for children. It did not explicitly require coverage of ABA, but by 2022, every state Medicaid program covered ABA.

In addition, more kids are getting diagnosed with autism as screenings increase. As a result, state spending on the service has skyrocketed. In Indiana, for example, Medicaid spending on ABA therapy grew from $21 million in 2017 to $611 million in 2023. The sharp increase has prompted Indiana, and other states, to take steps to control costs.

Meanwhile, federal auditors have begun examining states' coverage of ABA services to ferret out fraud and abuse.

Mariel Fernandez, vice president of government affairs at the Council of Autism Service Providers, a nonprofit trade association, acknowledged that states are facing difficult choices.

"For such a costly and intensive service, the states need to explore how to best reimburse this benefit so that it's sustainable and promotes quality," said Fernandez, who is also a board-certified behavioral analyst. "Is [the rate] going to bankrupt Medicaid? Is it going to ensure that people are actually receiving the service?"

The Medicaid changes included in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act that President Donald Trump signed in July will increase the pressure: The law includes more than $900 billion in federal spending cuts over the next decade. Medicaid is funded jointly by the federal government and the states.

Meanwhile, Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has described autism as a rapidly growing "epidemic" in the U.S. and has made it a major focus of his tenure. Kennedy has promoted the debunked theory that there's a link between childhood vaccines and autism.

Curbing costs

Several states this year have considered curbing ABA costs by capping therapy hours, tightening provider enrollment rules, reducing reimbursement rates or changing patient eligibility rules. A bill in New York, for example, would establish a 680-hour annual cap on ABA services.

But nowhere has the issue been more prominent than in Indiana, where Medicaid has covered ABA therapy since 2016.

Historically, Indiana Medicaid has reimbursed ABA providers for most services at a rate of 40 percent, regardless of what they charged.

That "created some very strange incentives for a small portion of the provider network," said Jason McManus, president of Indiana Providers of Effective Autism Treatment (InPEAT), which represents smaller ABA providers in Indiana and larger providers that operate in Indiana and elsewhere. "You had folks who were charging exorbitant amounts for the service."

Beginning in 2024, Indiana lowered its reimbursement rate to about $68 per hour – and received plenty of pushback.

"That did have an impact on the provider community," McManus said. "You had a lot of folks, smaller shops, who ended up closing their doors or consolidating with other organizations. So that was disruptive."

And that year, the HHS inspector general issued a report which found that Indiana's Medicaid program made at least $56 million in "improper" payments to ABA therapy providers in 2019 and 2020.

The state's rapidly rising ABA costs and the federal audit prompted Republican Gov. Mike Braun to issue an executive order earlier this year creating a working group to examine ways to cut costs without compromising quality.

The group crafted recommendations to correct the problems identified in the federal audit and put ABA coverage on a financially sustainable path. Without changes in the state's reimbursement policies, the group concluded, Indiana's Medicaid spending on ABA therapy would reach a projected $825 million by 2029.

This month, Braun unveiled the group's recommendations, which include the creation of a new ABA office to increase oversight and lower reimbursement rates, which the state has not yet detailed.

ABA allows people with autism "to obtain the highest level of independence that's possible for them," said McManus, who served on the working group.

"But from a state perspective, I can see how, if you're purely just looking at the cost, you would say, 'Wow, this is a cost that has grown over time, and if absent all other contexts, this is something we need to pay attention to, because it's unsustainable.'"

Nebraska rate cut

In Nebraska, state officials also have been looking for ways to control spiraling ABA costs: Last year, Nebraska Medicaid paid out more than $85 million for ABA therapy, a surge from $4.6 million in 2020.

In July, the state announced that it would cut its Medicaid reimbursement rates for ABA, including a 48 percent cut to reimbursement for direct therapy provided by a behavior technician. That brought the rate to $74.80 per hour, down from about $144 per hour. Rates for therapy by physicians or other board-certified professionals also were reduced by about 37 percent.

Many providers saw the cuts coming, as the state has had the highest hourly reimbursement rate in the nation.

"It would be fiscally irresponsible of the state to maintain that," said Leila Allen, vice president of external affairs at Lighthouse Autism Center, which has ABA therapy centers in Nebraska as well as in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan and North Carolina.

Sam Wallach, president of Attain, an ABA therapy provider that operates in Nebraska and a dozen other states and Washington, D.C., said the service is "life-changing for children and families." He views the ABA reduction as a "correction" that will make it feasible for Nebraska Medicaid to continue to cover it.

"The previous rates were well above what most Medicaid programs pay nationally, and while that created short-term benefits, it wasn't realistic or sustainable," Wallach said.

But some providers are taking issue with the way Nebraska went about those cuts.

For example, the state provided only 30 days' notice before making the change. "There were providers that within 30 days had to tell their staff, 'We're so sorry. We have to cut your salary by 'x' percent in 30 days,'" Allen said.

Nebraska also didn't examine how much it costs to provide ABA in the state, she said. The new rate is closer to what neighboring states, such as Iowa, pay. But therapists are few and far between in sparsely populated Nebraska, and families there often have to travel long distances to reach ABA providers.

"There was no cost survey to determine what the cost should be," said Allen. "They didn't take into account that you do have to pay people a little bit more to be able to work as behavior analysts in Nebraska."

Finding ABA therapists in Nebraska is particularly difficult for families with older kids. Angela Gleason, executive secretary on the board of autism advocacy organization Arc of Nebraska, has a 13-year-old son with autism. She said many companies only serve very young children, up to age 6.

"So for families like mine, it's then hard to even find a company that will serve his age and will provide that kind of support," she said. To be able to afford therapy, her son Teddy has Medicaid coverage as his secondary insurance. ABA therapy helps him with socializing and speaking with his speech delay.

"He needs a lot more help throughout his day than a normal 13-year-old without autism might need," Gleason said.

North Carolina court case

In North Carolina, the cost of covering autism services, including ABA, will total an estimated $639 million in fiscal 2026, up 425 percent from 2022, according to the state's Medicaid agency. About five autism providers made up roughly 41 percent of the state's increase in spending in fiscal year 2023-2024, according to the state.

Effective on Oct. 1, North Carolina Medicaid cut reimbursement rates for all kinds of health care services, arguing that state legislators had not budgeted enough money to keep up with rising costs. The reductions, which ranged from 3 percent to 10 percent, included a 10 percent cut to the reimbursement rate for autism services, including ABA therapy.

But the families of 21 children immediately sued the state Department of Health and Human Services to halt the move, arguing that it was discriminatory because it targeted children with disabilities.

Earlier this month, the families won a preliminary injunction temporarily halting the rate cut.

But families across the state are on edge as children with autism often see multiple providers – psychologists and speech language pathologists, for example – whose rate cuts were not paused, according to Allen, of Lighthouse Autism Center.

David Laxton, director of communications for the Autism Society of North Carolina, which is also a provider, said many providers won't be able to absorb the rate reductions and continue operating.

"At some point, the math is not going to math," Laxton said.

"It's very stressful for families, because right now, there's not an end in sight," Laxton said. "There's agreement that this [service] is very important, but there's not been action to bring an end to the cuts."

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adventtr / Getty Images

Health care consolidation and rising costs happen, but Obamacare is not the key culprit

By JULIE APPLEBY
KFF Health News (TNS)

In a recent "Meet the Press" appearance, Sen. James Lankford, R-Okla., joined a growing number of Republicans who are speaking out against Obamacare. One of his lines of attack: that the Affordable Care Act fueled health care consolidation.

"What Democrats did 15 years ago was they radically changed all health care in America. They moved all physicians under hospitals. They changed all the reimbursement programs. They shifted everything in," Lankford said Nov. 9.

This is one of a collection of Republican talking points related to the ACA that's been regularlyreprised, and there's a reason for it.

Democrats have been promised a Senate vote this month on whether to extend the ACA's enhanced subsidies, set to expire at year's end. The debate, however, has given Republicans an opportunity to resurface old criticisms and reignite efforts to overhaul or even undo the ACA. One GOP argument is that the sweeping health law fueled industry consolidation, which has led to higher prices and pushed more doctors to sell their practices to hospitals or insurers.

But industry experts disagree about how much this market trend can be tied to the law known as Obamacare.

Like everything in health policy, it's complicated.

"Most of us live in a different reality," said Chip Kahn, president and CEO of the Federation of American Hospitals, which supports extending the enhanced tax credits. "Our health system has many challenges, and I can't say the cost to individuals, to taxpayers, is not an issue. But to say having better coverage for more people made all these problems worse is really a stretch."

What's happened to doctors and hospitals?

First, some context. The ACA was passed by Congress in 2010, and most of its major provisions became effective in 2014.

Many health care mergers took place both before and after Obamacare became law, so it's hard to quantify its effect.

From 1998 to 2017 – a nearly two-decade period that included the first three years of full ACA implementation – 1,573 hospital mergers took place. An additional 428 hospital and health system mergers were announced from 2018 to 2023, according to a 2024 brief by KFF, a health information nonprofit that includes KFF Health News.

"The consolidation trend was in place before the ACA and just continued" as hospitals and other entities sought to improve their negotiating power, said Glenn Melnick, who studies hospital economics and is a professor at the University of Southern California's Price School of Public Policy.

The KFF brief did not directly address what role the ACA might have played in such mergers, although others have suggested its focus on coordinating care may have led to some of the activity.

Hospital groups contend that mergers are needed to bolster finances and counter increasing insurer consolidation, and that they can result in cost savings. Others disagree, arguing that many studies show price increases following mergers.

Andrew Harnik / Getty Images / TNS

Sen. James Lankford (R-Oklahoma) speaks to a reporter as he walks into the Senate Chamber on Dec. 11 in Washington, D.C. Two opposing health care bills intended to avert rising health care premiums failed.

> **"Our health system has many challenges, and I can't say the cost to individuals, to taxpayers, is not an issue. But to say having better coverage for more people made all these problems worse is really a stretch."**
>
> **CHIP KAHN**
> President and CEO, Federation of American Hospitals

Even with that trend – and despite what Lankford said – not all doctors now work for hospitals.

The percentage of physicians who have sold their practices to hospitals or private equity groups continues to rise, with only 42 percent currently working in private practices, according to the American Medical Association. That's down from about 60 percent in 2012, before the ACA's main provisions took effect.

Those who sold practices during the past 10 years, according to the AMA, most often cited inadequate payment rates as the reason.

Others note that many doctors want to be part of a larger group, with more scheduling flexibility and fewer paperwork hassles. Other changes, including the 2009 law known as the HITECH Act, which required hospitals and doctors to boost their use of electronic medical records, added to physicians' desire to sell, Kahn said.

"Physicians today, with their heavy debt load, are not looking to go into the old individual practice anymore," Kahn said. "That didn't happen because of the ACA."

Another key dynamic driving this market trend is market leverage, which was happening anyway, say some policy experts.

Hospitals "got control of the physician groups for contracting purposes," Melnick said.

When hospitals meet to negotiate with insurers, "they'll say, 'We'll drop out of your network, and we control 30 percent of the doctors, so they'll drop out, too.' It was a leverage play, and it worked," Melnick said.

How do insurers fit in?

Like hospitals, some insurers have been on a buying spree, snapping up doctor practices, for example. Optum, a division of UnitedHealth Group, owns or is affiliated with nearly 10 percent of the nation's physicians.

The health law "triggered an arms race among insurers and hospitals to grow larger and more expensive, leaving patients and small businesses with rising premiums and shrinking options," said Joel White, president of the Council for Affordable Health Coverage, in testimony before a Senate subcommittee in November. The council touts among its priorities right-leaning issues such as opposing government-run health care and supporting expanded market competition and health savings accounts.

Again, the insurance question is complex.

The number of insurers filing annual reports with the National Association of Insurance Commissioners has fluctuated: for example, 949 in 2015 and 1,155 last year.

But aggregate numbers are only one measure. Several big insurers control large market shares. In one recent analysis that looked across a variety of types of insurance – not just ACA plans – the American Medical Association concluded that most areas are highly concentrated, with about 47 percent of those markets having one insurer with a commercial market share of 50 percent or more.

The AMA says such market power leads to higher premiums and results in reduced payments to doctors.

As for the marketplaces that offer ACA coverage, the number of insurers has also fluctuated over time, usually because of variations in anticipated premiums and the regulatory landscape, with a national average of nearly eight at the law's inception, falling to 5.4 in 2018, but rising to nearly 10 nationally in 2025, according to KFF. Because that's an average, some states, such as Texas, have 15 insurers, while seven states – Alaska, Arkansas, Connecticut, Hawaii, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia – and the District of Columbia have only two.

Premium increases aren't new either, nor are they hitting only ACA plans.

In fact, premiums for people buying their own coverage and those for workers who get insurance through an employer have almost always risen yearly – often above inflation levels – a trend that predates the ACA.

Critics of the ACA note that premiums in the individual market were lower before the law kicked in. However, critics often don't note how different pre-ACA coverage was for people in the individual market, which could make it less expensive. Before the law, for example, insurers could reject people with preexisting health conditions, charge women more than men, and set annual or lifetime dollar limits on coverage. After 2014, that wasn't allowed in ACA plans.

Average premiums for the benchmark "silver" ACA plans have gone from $481 nationally in 2018 to $497 in 2025, according to KFF. The average monthly premium jumps to $625 next year, partly because of insurers' expectations of higher costs and a decline in enrollment if Congress does not extend the more generous tax subsidies. Those are averages, and prices will vary across the country depending on such things as age, location, and household income.

The conservative Paragon Health Institute notes that rising premiums mean larger taxpayer-supported subsidies. Deductibles, too, have gone up, with people on "bronze" plans, which have the lowest premiums, facing an average $7,476 deductible next year, compared with $5,113 in 2014.

The cost-consolidation link

A 2025 Health and Human Services report, issued during the last days of the Biden administration, found the trend of highly concentrated hospital services in most metropolitan statistical areas had started before and continued after the ACA. Prices also rose. The report, which noted the role of private equity firms in consolidation efforts, also cited studies showing physicians increasingly merged – with one another, hospitals, or private equity-backed firms.

That's important because the largest share of health care spending in the U.S. goes to hospital care, with physician services not far behind.

For Kahn, at the hospital federation, the real reason behind the mergers is financial: Many hospitals, he says, had to expand their reach or risk going under.

"Many health economists are my best friends," Kahn said, "but they have tunnel vision when they look at the health system." Hospitals must have sufficient revenue streams to cover the cost of patient care, he said, and consolidation is their way to respond "to all of the burdens and requirements and demands" they face.

While there is no question that health care consolidation has happened, much of it predated the ACA, Melnick said.

"At the end of the day, the ACA market never became that big to drive the overall restructuring of the industry," he said. "A lot of what they are attributing to the ACA would have happened anyway."

KFF Health News is a national newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues and is one of the core operating programs of KFF – the independent source for health policy research, polling and journalism.

FINANCE

Priced out of 75% of the market, Americans' dream of homeownership has become a luxury

By ALEX GAILEY
Bankrate.com (TNS)

Justin Sullivan / Getty Images / TNS

A sign is posted in front of a home for sale on Aug. 7, 2024, in San Anselmo, California.

Julia Sheers and her boyfriend want to buy a house. The housing market in Charlotte, North Carolina, just won't let them.

They've run into the same wall as millions of other Americans: too few homes they can afford and too much competition for the ones that are in their price range.

Like many first-time buyers, the 29-year-old loan officer quickly discovered how steep the cost of homeownership has become when she started house hunting in May.

"If you told me a year or two ago that I'd be spending half a million dollars on a house, I would've thought you were crazy," Sheers said. "But now it's like, 'Oh, that's not bad. That's a good price.' Everything is definitely really expensive."

In most of America's largest cities, a home is now a luxury item that many cannot afford. A new Bankrate analysis of real estate and income data shows that anyone earning the median U.S. income will find themselves priced out of three out of every four U.S. homes on the market.

A big reason why: there simply aren't enough homes up for sale right now. Homeowners who locked in ultra-low mortgage rates during the pandemic have been staying put, and builders haven't kept up with demand since the Great Recession.

At the same time, home prices soared during the pandemic, followed by the steepest rise in mortgage rates in about two decades. With wages struggling to keep up, housing affordability has reached historically low levels in recent years.

The typical household earns almost $80,000 a year, according to the Claritas estimates of U.S. Census Bureau data, far less than the $113,000 needed to afford a median-priced home of $435,000 as of July. A prospective homebuyer's income would need to top $200,000 to afford the median-priced home in Seattle, San Francisco and New York, according to Bankrate's analysis.

Even as that dream feels increasingly out of reach, Americans' desire to own a home hasn't faded. Prospective homebuyers routinely reach beyond what they can comfortably afford, experts say. And if they're lucky enough to find that one in four that's affordable, many times they're seeing intense competition that pushes prices higher.

Inside the housing affordability data

To show how tough the market is for would-be buyers, Bankrate looked at a key statistic: the share of available homes in a given real estate market that are affordable to the typical household.

If close to 50 percent of the real estate in a metro area is within reach according to your income, you have options and a path to homeownership there, said Hannah Jones, senior economic research analyst at Realtor.com.

"But when you see that the typical household can only afford 30 percent or 20 percent of the homes on the market, that's when the market is not calibrated well to the income levels of locals," Jones said.

Bankrate's analysis of Realtor.com data found that in the priciest housing markets like Miami, Los Angeles and San Diego, fewer than one in 50 listings are affordable to the typical household. That's no surprise, given that average home prices in Los Angeles and San Diego exceed $1 million.

On the other hand, several large markets in the Rust Belt and South still offer a glimmer of hope and a measure of affordability in 2025. Typical homebuyers in Pittsburgh and St. Louis can still afford one in two listings, while it's around two in five listings in Detroit, Cincinnati and Birmingham, Alabama.

Out of the 34 largest U.S. metros, only about a dozen have more than 30 percent of listings that are affordable to the typical household, according to Bankrate's analysis. Most fall below that threshold, including housing markets that have long been considered affordable, like Philadelphia, San Antonio and Charlotte.

The findings show how out of balance the nation's housing market has become. Nationally, over 75 percent of U.S. homes on the market are unaffordable to the typical household, and the typical American household needs to make at least $33,000 more annually to be able to afford a median-priced house. In most of the nation's largest metros, buying a typical home now takes at least a six-figure income.

$30K+ affordability gap for typical U.S. households

The typical household earns roughly $80,000 per year, while homebuyers need an income of at almost $113,000 afford a median-priced home in the U.S. ($435,000 per Redfin).

Differences in affordability from region to region often trace back to whether new houses are being built. In parts of the South and West, new construction is helping to grow supply. Jones said those regions have brighter outlooks than the Northeast and Midwest, where building has lagged and inventory levels remain 40 percent to 60 percent below pre-pandemic norms.

In Miami, for example, the median price for condos and single-family homes has increased over 80 percent since the COVID-19 pandemic, says Ana Bozovic, a market adviser for the Miami Association of Realtors. She attributes the home price surge largely to Miami's population boom over the past five years.

"There's this flow of wealth and talent that's coming here that's really changing the landscape here for buyers at all levels," Bozovic said. "That's a force that isn't going away."

Similar dynamics have put homeownership out of reach in other coastal markets, too. Four of the 10 least affordable metros are in California, underscoring the state's chronic housing shortage. Other markets where affordability is especially strained include Boston, New York and Seattle.

"These places have always been expensive, but it has definitely intensified over the last five or six years as home price growth has outpaced wage growth," Jones said.

How buying a home became so difficult and expensive

Housing experts say homeownership in America has reached its most challenging point in decades. Over half of Americans report their incomes haven't kept pace with home prices, and one in five aspiring homeowners believe they may never save enough to buy, according to a 2025 Bankrate survey.

A wide body of research also shows average home prices are up roughly 50 percent across the country since 2020, and wages haven't been able to keep up with the rapid home price growth.

Wages have grown 22 percent since the start of 2021, according to Bankrate's analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

Ultra-low mortgage rates between 2020 and 2022 helped fuel a buying frenzy, and prices kept climbing even as rates began to rise. It wasn't until this year that demand finally started to cool and supply began to grow in some Southern and Western markets. Still, most of the nation's metros saw home prices continue to climb in the third quarter, according to a recent report from the National Association of Realtors.

When borrowing costs are high, competition intensifies for lower-priced homes, quickly depleting what little affordable inventory exists, according to Zhao. Many would-be buyers end up renting for longer, especially as rents continue to be significantly cheaper than mortgage payments in the short term.

On average, renting is cheaper than paying a mortgage in all 50 of the largest U.S. metros in 2025 – with the cost difference between the two growing in 38 metros since last year, according to a 2025 Bankrate analysis.

The root of the problem, though, is supply – particularly of affordable housing. The U.S. faces a housing deficit of about 4.7 million, driven by more than a decade of underbuilding after the Great Recession.

Adding to the burden, home insurance costs and property taxes have increased by double digits across the country. All of these pressures have pushed homeownership further out of reach, especially for younger buyers. The median age of a first-time homebuyer now stands at 40 years old, an all-time high, according to the National Association of Realtors.

Zhao said the U.S. housing market today resembles a story of the haves and have-nots. Those who bought during the pandemic before mortgage rates ticked up or who have owned homes long enough to benefit from years of price appreciation lucked out, according to Zhao.

Meanwhile, those who didn't buy have seen their buying power shrink before their eyes, forcing them to settle for smaller homes, accept longer commutes or delay buying altogether, she said.

"The people who you know are finding homeownership to be easier either have higher income or they have family members who can help," Zhao said. "There are also those who bought a home before 2022. If you were part of that group, you got pretty lucky."

It took over a year for this Pittsburgh couple to buy their first home

Even in places considered havens for first-time buyers, like Pittsburgh, where roughly half of listings remain affordable, competition has intensified in recent years.

Allison Dunbar, a product development coordinator, and her husband, a business analyst, began house hunting at the end of 2022 in Pittsburgh. But they found themselves repeatedly outbid by investors or seasoned buyers. Between late 2022 and spring 2024, they made more than 20 offers, all of which were unsuccessful.

"When you're trying to buy a home for the first time, it's hard to compete," Dunbar said. "It doesn't feel like a shiny, picturesque experience. It felt like an extra job for the most part."

Their luck changed in spring 2024 when they viewed a $250,000 home on a rainy Saturday. "Only like six people had walked through," she said. They made an offer at the asking price, and this time, the seller accepted.

The couple used Pennsylvania's first-time homebuyer program, which offers down payment and closing cost assistance but involves more red tape for sellers.

"To lots of sellers, it's a disadvantage because you have to go through different inspections," she said. Still, they refused to waive any inspections. "It just didn't feel right with us and we made sure to stick to our guns."

When their offer was finally accepted, the relief was immediate. "It was a very much 'pinch me' moment," she said.

Now, more than a year later, Dunbar said she and her husband are grateful for the stability of homeownership after such a long and uncertain search.

"It was a struggle," she said, "but worth it, most likely."

Will housing affordability ever improve?

Housing experts across the board seem to agree: The affordability crisis in the housing market isn't going away anytime soon.

"It will be like slowly easing out of this affordability situation versus anything that's going to just flip the switch," Jones said.

Realtor.com forecasts a more balanced housing market in 2026 – one where home price growth steadies, a slight drop in mortgage rates offers more breathing room and bargaining power tilts more toward buyers.

For now, the market remains stuck in a tug of war between buyers and sellers. That leaves today's buyers facing fewer choices, steeper prices and higher borrowing costs.

A modest drop in mortgage rates could bring some relief, but housing experts don't expect them to fall anywhere near the historic lows of 2020 and 2021. Stronger wage growth would also help, though it will take time for wages to catch up to home prices, according to Jones.

"That's really what we need to happen to get back to the same state of affordability that we were looking at before the pandemic," Jones said. "It's a very long road."

In the long run, experts say the only real fix is to build more homes, especially those affordable to middle-income households. Until supply and demand find better balance across the country, homeownership will continue to stay out of reach for millions of would-be buyers.

"Homeownership has become increasingly unattainable," Zhao said. "There really is the story of the people who got in in time versus the people who did not."

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With homes out of reach, renters are re-defining the American Dream

By NATALIE TODOROFF
Bankrate.com (TNS)

Jordan Perkins, 36, could be a homeowner, but for now, he chooses to rent. He earns a comfortable salary from his sales job and is close to a seven-figure net worth – the product of an aggressive savings strategy he's had since his late 20s.

It just makes more sense right now, Perkins says. His two-bedroom condo in San Francisco, nicely situated with a view of the Golden Gate Bridge and Washington Square Park, rents for around $4,500 per month. "To buy the same unit, I'd be paying around $10,000 per month for the mortgage and need to put 20 percent down, not to mention insurance, HOA fees and maintenance," Perkins says.

As their peers pour through real estate listings in search of their "forever" home, a dedicated minority of U.S. adults like Perkins are moving in the opposite direction, finding that renting can provide a financial freedom that homeownership cannot.

The numbers back them up: A Bankrate analysis of housing data shows that homes have become so expensive in recent years that Americans earning the median income are priced out of three in every four homes on the market. It's also getting cheaper to rent, while the cost of owning is increasingly out of reach for most.

What's more, renters don't need to shell out thousands of dollars to fix broken rain gutters or electrical outlets, and they're not locked into a 30-year contract. Extra money in their budgets can be used right away or invested, not squirreled away in case an HVAC system busts.

Perkins cites this as a major reason he's been able to invest and grow his savings. If he owned, "my money would be tied up in a house – which might pay off eventually, but it might not," he says.

Besides, Perkins, an avid surfer, is determined to live a short drive from the waves. He tells me he could buy his childhood home in Idaho outright if he wanted to, but has no desire to be landlocked. "It's not the life I want," he says.

"Just because owning a home was my parents' reality doesn't mean it has to be mine."

With home prices ratcheting ever higher, prospective buyers are forced to squeeze even more money out of their budgets to stake their claim on a home. In many cases, buyers are spending much more than the real estate industry recommends, putting their finances at risk and making it tougher for the investment to eventually pay off.

"Your home shouldn't be where your wealth is," Alabama-based mortgage broker Paul Leara says. When his clients are on the fence about buying, Leara urges them to consider what it costs to buy a house – closing costs, realtor fees, etc. – and instead think about putting that money into an index fund.

"It will compound and grow to dwarf the equity you think you're getting with a home," he says.

Leara's advice echoes the mindset of renters in a variety of communities around the country. For them, the decision to rent isn't about settling for what's in their budget. It's about creating a level of freedom, flexibility and control that homeownership can't give.

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FOOD

Cheers!

THESE HOLIDAY COCKTAIL RECIPES WILL RAISE THE BAR AT YOUR NEXT PARTY

By GRETCHEN MCKAY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)

Thiago Leite has a simple philosophy when it comes to making cocktails, and it applies whether you're hosting a fancy dinner party for friends or simply curling up on the couch for a quiet night with your partner and Netflix.

"Make what you like," he says.

Consider the Caipiroska he was stirring together on a test run for Fairmont Pittsburgh's holiday cocktail classes.

Leite, who is both the Downtown hotel's banquet director and restaurant manager, was born in the U.S., but he spent every summer of his childhood in Brazil with his family. The national drink there is the Caipirinha, a sweet and tangy cocktail made with fresh lime, sugar and cachaca, a vegetal distilled spirit made from fresh sugarcane juice.

Like most bartenders, Leite is a fan of vodka, a "sponge" spirit that readily takes on the flavors of whatever it is mixed with. On this day, he was tweaking the long-established recipe by using Absolut Elyx instead of cachaca, and brown sugar in place of the superfine cane sugar that traditionally sweetens the drink.

Known for its refreshing quality, this twist on a Caipirinha might seem like an odd choice in Pittsburgh in December. But remember Leite's No. 1 rule about following your bliss.

"Christmas is hot in Brazil. We're in sandals and flip-flops," he explained as he muddled wedges of lime and slices of orange with what looked to be heaps of the caramel-colored sugar in a rocks glass.

Here, it's hot chocolate and hot toddies, but there everything is iced."

After a taste test, you, too, would have to agree it's delicious.

A second cocktail featuring whiskey felt a little bit more like Christmas.

Called the Bashful Boulevardier, the spirit-forward drink is also known as a whiskey-based Negroni because it includes Campari, a bitter bright-red Italian aperitif. Here, rich cherry syrup adds a sweet and tangy twist and a dash of raspberry-flavored Chambord lends a definite luxe, holiday feel.

"It's what we call a conversation drink," explained Leite.

That is, a sipping cocktail that encourages social interaction while it is enjoyed over time instead of quickly gulped down.

A Prohibition-era drink generally made with rye whiskey, the Boulevardier is also a perfect "freezer door" cocktail that makes entertaining a breeze, he added, because it can be made in advance in large batches. You can scale up the recipe to serve eight, 10 or even 12 people, depending on the size of your guest list.

This is the second year for the hotel's holiday cocktail classes. Depending on the day, each will feature one of four spirits – vodka, gin, whiskey or tequila.

"Since it's a cocktail class, you'll learn to pour from the bottle," Leite said.

Attendees also will get instruction on blending ingredients, flavors and botanicals, and try their hand at fundamental techniques like shaking, stirring and muddling.

Aromatics used to flavor drinks also will be addressed "since you remember things through smell more than anything," he said.

One example: cinnamon sticks that are scorched lightly on one end with a lighter and added to espresso martinis in the Fairmont's upscale bar fl.2. (They sell more than 1,000 a month.)

Once you've got the recipes down pat, Leite will offer tips for setting up a home bar so you can create your favorite cocktail whenever the mood strikes. They include:

■ Be sure to have the fundamentals: whiskey, vodka, gin, rum and tequila.

■ Have the right tools at the ready, including a good shaker for mixing cocktails. He recommends either a two-piece Boston shaker (a metal tin and a mixing glass) or a three-piece cobbler shaker featuring a metal container, a lid with built-in strainer and a cap.

■ A muddler to gently mash and mix ingredients like fruit and sugar. The stainless-steel ones used at the hotel have a "tenderizer" head to better crush herbs and fruits.

■ A long-handled spoon for stirring cocktails with spirits, liqueurs and vermouth (like a martini, Old Fashioned or Manhattan). Stirring chills and dilutes a cocktail without introducing air bubbles.

■ A jigger to precisely measure ingredients. A double-sided, 1 ounce over 2 ounce measuring vessel allows you to maintain consistency and quality in every drink.

■ Love cocktails that contain fresh juice, cream, milk or egg whites? A strainer is essential for straining out ice and other solid ingredients in shaken cocktails.

■ No bar is complete without a corkscrew for opening wine bottles and some spirits.

■ Mixers including bitters (Angostura is considered the standard), tonic water, soda and ginger beer.

Finally, a selection of glassware – highball and lowball glasses for mixed drinks, martini and coupe glasses for cocktails, and wine and champagne glasses for celebrating special occasions.

Below, we share the recipes for Leite's cocktails, along with two others that will be served this holiday season at two local restaurants, Downtown's Ritual House and Shorty's Pins x Pints on the North Shore.

Happy holidays!

ABOVE: Bartender Thiago Leite pours brown sugar in his Caipi Vodka as The Fairmont Hotel gives a demo class of how to make 3 holiday cocktails on Nov. 23 at The Fairmont Hotel in downtown Pittsburgh. **RIGHT:** A Aperol Spritz at The Fairmont Hotel in downtown Pittsburgh.

Photos by Justin Guido / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette / TNS

A Caipi Vodka gets mixed around at The Fairmont Hotel in downtown Pittsburgh.

Caipiroska
Serves 1

Christmastime is hot in Brazil, so holiday celebrations usually feature iced cocktails instead of hot toddies. This refreshing cocktail from the Fairmont Pittsburgh is a vodka-based twist on the Caipirinha, a classic Brazilian cocktail made with cachaca, sugar and lime.

You can make it sweeter or more tart, depending on the amount of brown sugar.

1/2 lime, cut into wedges
1 slice orange
1-2 tablespoons brown sugar
2 ounces vodka
Dried lime slice, for garnish

Place lime wedges in a sturdy glass, such as a rocks glass, or a cocktail shaker. Add orange slice and sugar, and using a muddler, gently crush them together to release the juice and essential oils from the rind. (But be careful not to over-muddle the rind, which can make the drink bitter.)

Pour vodka into the glass or shaker with the muddled lime mixture.

Fill the glass with crushed ice. If using a shaker, add ice and shake well to chill and dilute the mixture.

Pour all contents (liquid, lime pieces and ice) into an old-fashioned or rocks glass filled with ice.

Garnish with dried lime slice and serve immediately.

Thiago Leite, Fairmont Pittsburgh

Bashful Boulevardier
Serves 1

2 ounces whiskey
1/2 ounce Luxardo cherry syrup
1/2 ounce Chambord
1 ounce Campari
3 dashes bitters

Add whiskey, cherry syrup, Chambord, Campari and bitters into a mixing glass.

Fill the glass with ice and stir until the mixture is well chilled and silky.

Strain into a rocks glass over a large ice cube to keep the drink cold without diluting too quickly.

Finish with a Luxardo cherry or a gentle twist of orange peel for a subtle aromatic lift.

Thiago Leite, Fairmont Pittsburgh

Nutella Espresso Martini
Makes 1 cocktail

This sweet and creamy martini can double as a dessert. It includes Kahlua and Buttershots, a butterscotch-flavored schnapps.

1 scoop Nutella
1 ounce espresso, cooled
1 ounce vodka
1 ounce Kahlua coffee liqueur
1/2 ounce Buttershots

Add 1 generous scoop of Nutella to your shaker.

Add espresso, then give it a quick stir to help the Nutella blend smoothly.

Pour in vodka, Kahlua and Buttershots.

Fill the shaker with ice and shake vigorously until the mixture is chilled and velvety.

Strain into a martini glass for a clean, glossy finish.

Garnish with a light drizzle of Nutella or a few espresso beans for an elegant touch. You also can line the rim of the martini glass with Nutella and roll in crushed nuts or cookies.

Thiago Leite, Fairmont Pittsburgh

Shorty's Gingerbread Smash
Serves 1

This festive cocktail is Shorty's Pins x Pints' riff on a classic Old Fashioned. It brings together the warm spice of gingerbread cookies and the smoothness of whiskey in a cocktail that's perfect for the holiday season.

To make simple syrup, combine equal parts sugar and water in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Bring to a boil, stirring, until sugar has dissolved, then allow to cool. Store in the refrigerator for up to 1 month.

2 ounces Bird Dog Gingerbread Whiskey
1 ounce simple syrup
2 dashes orange bitters
Sliced lemon, for muddling
Orange rind, for garnish

Combine whiskey, simple syrup and bitters into a mixing glass.

Add a lemon wedge, and muddle.

Add ice, and stir for 14 rotations, until the dilution is at desired consistency.

Strain into a glass filled with fresh ice.

Rub the rim of the cocktail glass with an orange rind to express it, then drop into the glass.

Shorty's Pins x Pints, North Shore

Ritual House Holiday Beach Margarita
Serves 1

Margaritas are one of the most popular and recognizable cocktails. This one from Ritual House, Downtown, gets the holiday treatment with coconut milk and a cinnamon-brown sugar syrup. It's best served in a rocks glass.

1 1/2 ounces tequila blanco
1 ounce coconut milk
1 ounce cinnamon brown sugar vanilla syrup
3/4 ounce lime juice
1/4 ounce Cointreau
3-4 dashes orange bitters

Combine tequila, coconut milk, syrup, lime juice, Cointreau and bitters in a cocktail shaker and shake hard.

Strain into a glass over ice. Garnish with cinnamon stick and fresh grated nutmeg.

Ritual House, Downtown

APPRECIATION

Rob Reiner's humanity was a signature of his TV work, in front of and behind the camera

By ROBERT LLOYD
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

TOP: Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times / TNS; ABOVE: Alex Garcia / Chicago Tribune / TNS

TOP: Rob Reiner, left, and Sally Struthers of "All in the Family" at the 75th Primetime Emmy Awards at the Peacock Theater in Los Angeles on Jan. 15, 2024. **ABOVE:** Filmmaker Rob Reiner after an interview in Chicago on June 18, 2014.

Rob Reiner was a movie director who began as an actor who wanted to direct movies. The bridge between these careers was "This Is Spinal Tap" in 1984, his first proper film, in which he also acted. His original inclination, based on the music documentaries he had studied, had been not to appear onscreen, but he decided there was practical value in greeting the audience with a face familiar from eight seasons of "All in the Family" as Archie Bunker's left-wing son-in-law, Michael "Meathead" Stivic.

Reiner's television career began at 21, partnered with Steve Martin, writing for "The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour." As an actor, his early years were characterized by the small parts and guest shots that describe the early career of many performers we come to know well. He played multiple characters on episodes of "That Girl" and "Gomer Pyle, USMC," a delivery boy on "Batman," and appeared on "The Andy Griffith Show" and "Room 222." His last such role, in 1971, the same year "All in the Family" premiered, was on "The Partridge Family" as a tender-hearted, poetry-writing, tattooed biker who becomes attached to Susan Dey's character and somewhat improbably takes her to a school dance. It's a performance that prefigures the tenderness and humanity that would become a signature of his work as a writer, director and performer – and, seemingly, a person.

On "All in the Family," in his jeans and work shirt, with a drooping mustache that seemed to accentuate a note of sadness, Reiner largely played the straight man, an irritant to Carroll O'Connor's Archie Bunker, teeing up the issue-oriented dialectic. Once in a while he'd be given a broad comic meal to chew, as when wife Gloria (Sally Struthers) goes into labor while they're out for dinner, and he accelerates into classic expectant-father sitcom panic. But minus the "Meathead" material, "All in the Family" is as much a social drama as it is a comedy, with Mike and Gloria struggling with money, living with her parents, new parenthood, and a relationship that blows hot and cold until it finally blows out for good. He's not a Comic Creation, like Archie or Edith with their malaprops and mispronunciations, or even Gloria, but his importance to the storytelling was certified by two supporting actor Emmys.

What Reiner carried from "Family" into his later appearances was a sort of bigness. He could seem loud – and loudness is something Norman Lear's shows reveled in – even when he's speaking quietly. Physically he occupied a lot of space, more as time went on, and beginning perhaps with "Spinal Tap," in which he played director Marty DiBergi, he transformed tonally into a sort of gentle Jewish Buddha. In the 2020 miniseries "Hollywood," Ryan Murphy's alternate history of the 1930s picture business, the studio head he plays is not the desk-banger of cliche, but he is a man with an appetite. ("Get me some brisket and some of those cheesy potatoes and a lemon meringue pie," he tells a commissary waiter – against doctor's orders, having just emerged from a heart attack-induced coma. "One meal's not going to kill me.") He's the boss, but, in a scene as lovely as it is historically unlikely, he allows his wife (Patti LuPone), who has been running things during his absence, to also be the boss.

Reiner left "All in the Family" in 1978, after its eighth season to explore life outside Michael Stivic. (In 1976, while still starring on "Family," he tested those waters, appearing on an episode of "The Rockford Files" as a narcissistic third-rate football player.) "Free Country," which he co-created with frequent writing partner Phil Mishkin, about a family of Lithuanian immigrants in the early 1900s, aired five episodes that summer. The same year, ABC broadcast the Reiner-Mishkin-penned TV movie "More Than Friends" (available on Apple TV) in which Reiner co-starred with then-wife Penny Marshall. Directed by James Burrows, whose dance card would fill up with "Taxi," "Cheers" and "3rd Rock From the Sun," it's in some respects a dry run for Reiner's "When Harry Met Sally…," tracking a not-quite-romantic but ultimately destined relationship across time.

Future Spinal Tap lead singer Michael McKean appears there as a protest singer, while the 1982 CBS TV movie "Million Dollar Infield," written again with Mishkin, features Reiner alongside future Spinal Tap lead guitarist Christopher Guest and bassist Harry Shearer; it's a story of baseball, families and therapy. Co-star Bruno Kirby the year before had co-written and starred in Reiner's directorial debut, "Tommy Rispoli: A Man and His Music," a short film that aired on the long-gone subscription service On TV as part of the "Likely Stories" anthology. Kirby's character, a Frank Sinatra-loving limo driver (driving Reiner as himself), found its way into "This Is Spinal Tap," though here he is the center of a Reineresque love story.

After "Spinal Tap," as Reiner's directing career went from strength to strength, he continued to act in other people's pictures ("Sleepless in Seattle," "Primary Colors," "Bullets Over Broadway" and "The Wolf of Wall Street," to name but a few) and some of his own, up to this year's "Spinal Tap II: The End Continues." On television, he mostly played himself, which is to say versions of himself, on shows including "It's Garry Shandling's Show," "Curb Your Enthusiasm" and, of all things, "Hannah Montana," with a few notable exceptions.

The most notable of these, to my mind, is "New Girl," in which Reiner appeared in 10 episodes threaded through five of the series' seven seasons, as Bob Day, the father of Zooey Deschanel's Jess. Jamie Lee Curtis, married to Guest in the real world, played his ex-wife, Joan, with Kaitlin Olson as his new, much younger partner, Ashley, who had been in high school with Jess. He's positively delightful here, whether being overprotective of Deschanel or suffering her ministrations, dancing around Curtis, or fencing with Jake Johnson's Nick. Improvisational rhythms characterize his performance, whether he's sticking to the script or not. Most recently, he recurred in the fourth season of "The Bear," which has also featured Curtis, mentoring sandwich genius Ebraheim (Edwin Lee Gibson); their scenes feel very much like what taking a meeting with Reiner might be like.

Coincidentally, I have had Reiner in my ear over the past couple of weeks, listening to the audiobook version of "A Fine Line: Between Stupid and Clever," which he narrates with contributions from McKean, Shearer and Guest. A story of friendship and creativity and ridiculousness, all around a wonderful thing that grew bigger over the years, Reiner's happy reading throws this tragedy into sharper relief. I have a DVD on the way, though I don't know when I'll be up to watching it. I only know I will.

MOVIE REVIEW

20th Century Studios / TNS

Zoe Saldaña as Neytiri in "Avatar: Fire and Ash."

'Avatar: Fire and Ash' is another looker, little more

By MARK MESZOROS
The News-Herald (Willoughby, Ohio) (TNS)

I'm going to peel back the curtain.

I was seated in a theater's auditorium, 3D glasses on my face, as an advanced screening of "Avatar: Fire and Ash" began. From the start, I was distracted by the visuals – not because this third "Avatar" was as dazzling to the eyes as the two franchise entries that came before it, but instead because something was very wrong with them. A few shots were clear, but much of it was blurry – the vast majority of the backgrounds were a muddy mess – and the 3D simply wasn't working.

There is no way on Earth – or, as it were, on Pandora – that this was how visionary filmmaker James Cameron's latest science fiction epic was designed to look.

After a good-faith, hourlong effort to get past this, I left, deciding I wasn't paying close enough attention to the story and that I'd rather see the movie as it was made to be seen, even if it wasn't for a review, even when I could.

Fortunately, calls were made, emails were exchanged, strings were pulled, and two nights later I was back at the same theater – albeit in a different and larger, more technologically capable auditorium – for take two of "Avatar 3", with the promise that the problem had been solved by the staff.

From the start, I again was distracted by the visuals, this time for (mostly) the right reasons. It remains the case that no one does the kind of jaw-dropping 3D, motion-capture-fueled filmmaking that Cameron pulls off. The director of films ranging from "The Terminator" to "The Abyss" to "Titanic" offers these three-hour "Avatar" experiences that pull you into the action as close to literally as is imaginable.

I will note, though, that Cameron's use of a variable frame rate may be an issue for some viewers. I found certain scenes seemingly shot with the higher rate of 48 frames per second, as opposed to the standard 24, to look unnatural.

Still, most of what's on the screen – and floating in front of it – is so wowing that it's easy to lose yourself in the razzle dazzle to the point where you have to remind yourself to pay attention to the story.

The good news, if you want to call it that, is that the story is a snoozer.

"Fire and Ash" picks up shortly after the events of 2022's "Avatar: The Way of Water" and fails to move the overall narrative begun with 2009 megahit "Avatar" forward in any interesting way.

Even with its bloated runtime, there isn't enough room for all the characters – humans, aka "Sky People"; the Na'vi, the blue, tall and lean natives of the planet Pandora; and recoms, or recombinants, the new breed of transgenic human-Na'vi hybrid warriors created by the Earth's Resources Development Administration – crammed into the screenplay by director Cameron, Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver. (That trio, plus Josh Friedman and Shane Salerno, are credited with the story.)

Mainly, though, we again spend our time with the Sully clan, led by Marine-turned-Na'vi leader Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) and his wife, fierce Na'vi warrior

'Avatar: Fire and Ash'

★★ ½

MPA rating: PG-13 (for intense sequences of violence and action, bloody images, some strong language, thematic elements and suggestive material)

Running time: 3:15

How to watch: In theaters

Neytiri (Zoe Saldaña). Along with their biological children, son Lo'ak (Britain Dalton) and younger daughter Tuk (Trinity Jo-Li Bliss), they care for adopted daughter Kiri (Sigourney Weaver) and Spider (Jack Champion). Spider is the human son of Jake's archnemesis, Quaritch (Stephen Lang), the colonel in charge of an elite team of recom soldiers, who's treated largely like a brother by the children.

The Sullys continue to live in the planet's lovely reefs and among the Metkayina Clan, led by Tonowari (Cliff Curtis), and stand ready to defend the region alongside Tonowari, his pregnant wife, Ronal ("Titanic" star Kate Winslet), and their children, Tsireya (Bailey Bass) and Aonung (Filip Geljo).

To defend the people he loves, Jake is willing to turn back to man-made weaponry, but Neytiri has no interest in guns, holding fast to her long-held beliefs even as she now lives apart from the Omaticaya Clan and the humans with whom it's aligned.

"All I have here is my faith!" she insists, with Jake subsequently reminding her that she also has his love and that of their children.

The increasingly angry Na'vi woman seemingly has no love for Spider, and when the masks he needs to breathe Pandora's air become an issue, she and Jake decide he must be returned to the Omaticaya stronghold. The children are furious, but agree to the compromise that the whole family will take him there, instead of just sending him away with the Tlalim Clan, aka the Wind Traders, peaceful nomads who travel by awe-inspiring, sail-equipped airships.

Along the way, the Sullys make a new enemy, the Mangkwan Clan, aka the Ash People. Led by Varang (Oona Chaplin, "Game of Thrones"), they saw their way of life ravaged by a volcano, for which they blame the deity Eywa.

Varang is very interested in the weaponry of the Sky People – "Show me how to make thunder!" she demands of Jake as she holds a hefty automatic rifle – and eventually cozies up to Quaritch, the two baddies entering into what could be seen as a marriage of convenience.

As "Fire and Ash" bangs on (and on and on), hostages are taken (and rescued) and battles unfold, the climactic one centering around the RDA's interest in amrita, a potentially game-changing substance that can be harvested from Pandora's sophisticated whale-like species, the Tulkun.

Even when projected correctly, this movie is highly unfocused from a storytelling perspective.

Cameron and company attempt to mine something rich from the father-son dynamic between Jake and Lo'ak. The latter blames himself, as does his father, regretfully, for the death of his older brother, Neteyam (Jamie Flatters, who appears briefly in "Fire and Ash"). Disappointingly, the arc of a young man learning to believe in himself and earning his father's trust is warmed-over mush.

The same goes for the personal journey taken by Kiri, who begins to question her seemingly special connection to Eywa.

Some cuts would have helped. Trim a scene or two here, lose a minor character or three there. By the third hour, "Fire and Ash" feels as if it may never end.

And, ultimately, this third "Avatar" feels a lot like the second. Despite the title "Fire and Ash," Cameron remains most interested in the way of water – not exactly surprising given his passion for deep-sea exploration. Regardless, I expected a fresher story than this one, which seems to set up, well, yet another similar movie. (Time will tell if this very expensive film earns enough at the global box office to justify the making of the fourth of five planned entries.)

I've tried to rewatch the other "Avatar" movies at home, and even with them being streamed in 4K on a good TV, I invariably lose interest. For me, these movies are one-time experiences, rather spectacular ones that depend highly on 3D and a massive screen.

If you're planning to see "Fire and Ash," find the biggest screen you can and fork over the extra dough for 3D. And if you find something meaningful in the story, consider that a bonus.

MOVIE REVIEW

'The Housemaid' a trashy treat for holiday season

By KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service (TNS)

'The Housemaid'

★★★

MPA rating: R (for strong/bloody violent content, sexual assault, sexual content, nudity and language)

Running time: 2:11

How to watch: In theaters

Director Paul Feig has proved himself to be the preeminent purveyor of the finest high-camp trash one can find at the movie theater these days – and that's a compliment. If Feig is serving up the trash, then call me a raccoon, because I'm ready to dive in.

Feig's special sauce when it comes to these soapy, female-driven thrillers like "A Simple Favor," and now "The Housemaid," adapted by Rebecca Sonnenshine from a "BookTok" sensation by Freida McFadden, is clearly his comedy background. Feig understands exactly the tone and tropes to deploy here, and you can feel his knowing winks and nudges to the audience with every loaded glance, stray graze or wandering camera movement. It's as if he's saying, to us, and all the tipsy ladies in the audience, "check this out – LOL right?" LOL indeed, Mr. Feig, LOL.

"The Housemaid" is an erotic crime thriller that plays off silly sexual stereotypes and fantasies like the naughty maid and then flips them on their head.

In the opening scene, the drably dressed, bespectacled Millie (Sydney Sweeney) interviews for a live-in maid position with the warm and friendly wife and mother Nina Winchester (Amanda Seyfried) in her gorgeously appointed Long Island mansion designed by her wealthy husband, Andrew (Brandon Sklenar).

But all is not what it seems on the surface, for either applicant or employer. Both are hiding dark secrets, but Nina hires Millie nevertheless, and Millie, without any other options, gratefully accepts.

When Millie moves into the maid's quarters in the attic, she discovers that the Winchester home isn't as picture-perfect as

Daniel McFadden / Lionsgate / TNS

Sydney Sweeney, left, and Amanda Seyfried in "The Housemaid."

it seemed. Little things are off: she can't open her window, the groundskeeper Enzo (Michele Morrone) glowers at her constantly, items go missing, and CeCe (Indiana Elle), Nina's daughter, is exceedingly cold.

Then there are the big things that are off, like Nina's wild mood swings, requests that Nina then claims she never made, and the vicious gossip about her mental health among the other Stepford wives. Millie realizes she's in over her head with Mrs. Winchester, but her saving grace is the warm and handsome Mr. Winchester. Is that where this is going? Of course it is, we all happily groan together.

"The Housemaid" is like "Gaslight" meets "Jane Eyre," with a dash of "Rebecca," with all the various roles lightly scrambled, and a much sexier, nastier streak than any of those mannered mindbenders. Feig stylishly waltzes us through this steamy, twisty mystery with ease, but not necessarily sophistication – this is the kind of frothy entertainment that you can still enjoyably comprehend after a glass or two, which in fact might enhance the experience.

But it doesn't work without an actor of Seyfried's caliber, who can summon unpredictable mayhem from her fingertips, or without Sweeney, who works best in a register somewhere between ditzy blonde and tough little scrapper. Both actors exude an element of the unhinged that simmers right below the doe-eyed blond surface, and we know we need to be a little (or a lot) afraid of these women. The film also doesn't work without a heartthrob like Sklenar, as we need to fall in lust with his gorgeous exterior and intoxicatingly cuddly aura for this all to make sense.

There's not much more to divulge without giving it all away, but prepare to titter, gasp, scream and cheer for this juicy slice of indulgent women's entertainment. Go on, you deserve a little treat this holiday season.

BOOKS

‘Popcorn Disabilities’ author Kristen Lopez looks at disability portrayals in movies

By NINA METZ
Chicago Tribune (TNS)

In her new book “Popcorn Disabilities: The Highs and Lows of Disabled Representation in the Movies,” film critic and author Kristen Lopez says she wasn’t interested in writing “an academic book or one that felt like eating your vegetables.”

Even so, some publishers were skeptical.

“It’s not a sexy topic, which I’m aware of!” she says. “I wanted to write something that people can read where they’re not going to feel judged and can laugh a little. But also where I can talk about how movies have shaped a generation of disabled viewers – how these stereotypes leap off the screen and can hit the person watching them, and I use myself as the example. I talk about how these movies have affected me and how I see myself.”

A wheelchair user, Lopez talks about her frustration watching disabled characters played by abled actors, especially female characters.

“The disability is directly tied into how she looks. You don’t want to mess with the face, so you get a lot of blind, deaf, nonverbal performances, what I call ‘pretty disability.’ When you do see a wheelchair user, the woman is 5’6” and she’s sitting and she could pass for abled. For me, growing up, I couldn’t pass for abled. I’m not proportionate, I’m very small, I’m very compact. And growing up I was like, if these women have problems finding love and going about their lives and they’re beautiful women, what the hell does that mean for me? I don’t see anybody that looks like me!

“Most women that are disabled in films, who aren’t conventionally aesthetically attractive, are monsters,” she adds. “I talk in the book about my fear growing up of Zelda in ‘Pet Sematary’ (1989) because she looked more like me than someone like Jane Wyman in ‘Johnny Belinda’ (1948). So when you’re a young girl and already dealing with beauty standards in terms of weight and makeup and all of the ways that you can look attractive, if you’re a disabled girl and you’re watching movies about disabled women? You’re like, well, I don’t look like that, so I guess I’m unattractive and I shouldn’t exist. I worry about the next generation of disabled girls, because they don’t have something better.”

The book also includes chapters on mental and cognitive disabilities in film, a reluctance to acknowledge the way racism can complicate a disabled person’s experiences in the world, and whether abled actors playing disabled characters is a blatant play for awards.

We talk more about Hollywood’s conception of disabled people.

Q: There’s a phrase you use throughout the book, which is the Tiny Tim principle. Explain what that is.

A: Tiny Tim is the one that screwed it up for everyone! He’s obviously the character from “A Christmas Carol” and he’s kind of the de facto definition of what a disabled person is, where you have a character that’s disabled and therefore sickly, but he has such a good heart. His soul is pure. And through his purity and goodness and unselfishness, he is able to teach the miserly Scrooge how to be a good person. And that was something that set the tone for shaping the belief that disabled people were children in need of caring.

So that extended to movies more generally, where disabled characters are always good and almost saintly and they help teach able-bodied people how to be good people.

Q: In the book, you talk about the idea that what we see on screen often shapes how we understand or think about the world.

A: Culture influences movies, and movies have the ability to influence culture. I’ve had so many personal experiences with people where they feel that they understand me or understand my life because they’ve seen a movie.

Q: Let me push back a little. Isn’t that one of the things we love about the movies – that they give you a window into someone else’s experience?

A: They do! But at the same time, if the representation is bad and you don’t know that, then the bad representation becomes solidified as truth. That’s the problem. Unless you’re an active viewer and want to take the time to research and maybe read a book about it, you’re probably going to believe certain things that a movie is espousing, and movies codify ideas that trickle down into people’s perceptions of disability.

A lot of people who have met me are like, “You have sweet government money! The government pays you as a disabled person.” And I’m like, where do people get that idea? Movies don’t even discuss the issues inherent in the Social Security disability insurance system. And as I was watching movies for the book, I realized how often disabled characters are financially well-off or at least comfortable. We never see disabled characters struggle for money. But a lot of that is because the movies situate the character as being cared for by somebody – a wife or their parents – and movies don’t discuss how disabled people make money, or even have jobs.

Another example was watching David Gordon Green’s film “Stronger” (2017) with Jake Gyllenhaal, which was really kind of eye-opening because it was the first time in a long time I had seen a disabled character living in a house that was not designed for a wheelchair. And watching that character struggle to move around, to transfer to a toilet in a small bathroom, to transfer into a car – these moments are not big moments, but the fact that Green shows them is kind of amazing because I still meet people who are shocked that I can drive a car, because they’ve never seen it. And if you’ve never seen it and you don’t interact with disabled people, then, yeah, you’re not going to know that we can drive cars.

Q: Is there a stigma against hiring disabled actors?

A: There definitely is. Marissa Bode, who plays Nessarose in “Wicked” has talked about the fact that we still have abled actors “cripping up,” which is the terminology for when abled actors play disabled characters. I come at it from a slightly different perspective because I am an entertainment journalist and I understand, OK, butts in seats and movie stars sell.

In 1932, when Todd Browning does the horror-drama “Freaks,” it sets up this idea that disabled actors are inexperienced and can’t act and therefore can only play themselves. So if a movie doesn’t call for a disability, why would you hire a disabled actor?

Q: Let’s talk about disability in the horror genre.

A: Horror has always been hospitable to the disabled, I think, because monsters are coded that way, going back to the Boris Karloff version of “Frankenstein” (1931).

But horror movies also often have disabled lead characters and disabled women, in particular. I love the Chucky films; actress Fiona Dourif is not a disabled woman, but the character uses a wheelchair and the director Don Mancini spends time showing you how she cooks, how she navigates space. A criticism of the premise is that Chucky is 3 feet tall, you could just kick him, and Mancini’s like, wouldn’t it be great to look at a heroine who wouldn’t have that ability? And the way that she gets out of situations is really inventive and it’s great to see that she’s not a victim. That she’s not a helpless damsel waiting for an abled person to save her.

Q: What’s one film you think captures disability well?

A: I love “Coming Home” from 1978. It’s the story of a Vietnam vet, played by Jon Voight, who is a wheelchair user who is trying to find his way in a world of changing political morals, and being a disabled man, and he falls into a relationship with a woman, played by Jane Fonda, who is the wife of another vet. There are some abled actors who have done an amazing job playing disabled characters and that’s true here. I love the bits of business, like the way Voight wheels the wheelchair, the way that he moves through space. It feels authentic.

Q: Also, he’s a sexual character and I feel like most depictions of disabled people tend to be asexual.

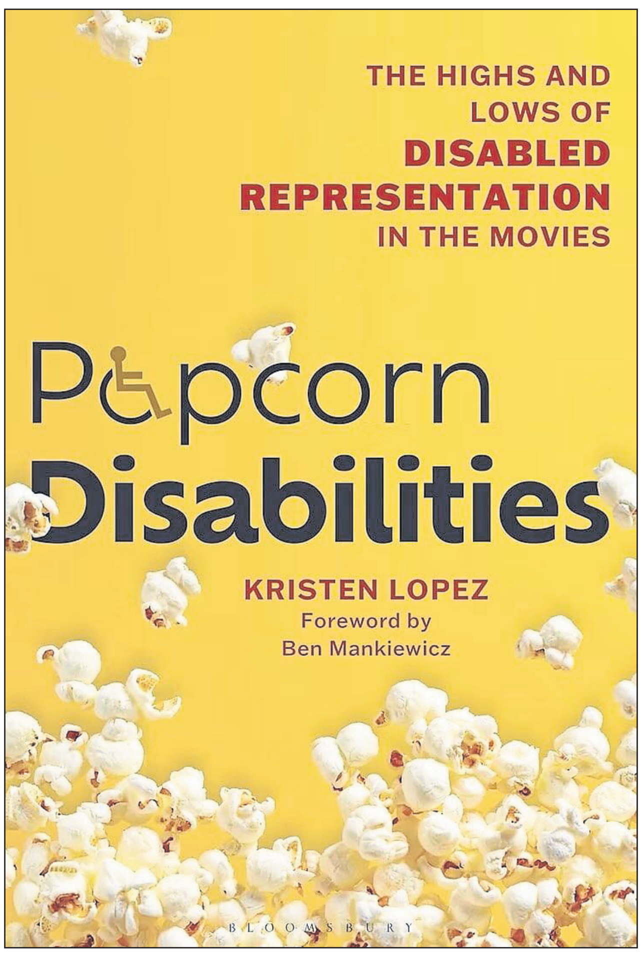
A: And if you’re a woman? Don’t expect to have sex at all. But yeah, “Coming Home” has a beautiful sex scene that’s hot regardless of the disability or not. And it’s a sex scene where the sexiness is in their communication. There’s a lot of discussion around, what’s going to work for him and “are you comfortable?”

Q: What’s one film that makes your skin crawl with its depiction of disability?

A: There are so many, but the one I always go for is “Me Before You” (2016) with Emilia Clarke and Sam Claflin. He plays a wealthy wheelchair user who lives in a castle and he is a curmudgeon who wants to kill himself because he doesn’t want to be disabled anymore. His family hires him an unqualified caregiver played by Clarke, who flirts with the line of being a sex worker. The hope is that he’ll fall in love with her and not want to kill himself. It’s based on a romance novel and it always makes me mad. I’m like, dude, you have nothing to complain about, you live in a castle, you have a tricked out van so you can go wherever you want and you’re still not happy.

And it sets a bad precedent for caregivers of disabled people. If you’re a woman, what’s the line between sex work and caregiving? That’s a thing that happens way too much in these types of movies. And the fact that she doesn’t listen to him; there are so many scenes where he tells her, as a wheelchair user, what works for his experience, and she’s like, “You don’t know!”

It’s just so stereotypical that disabled people are angry about their disability, but also financially well-off and are just waiting for their turn to die. It never ceases to piss me off.



Bloomsbury Academic / TNS

BESTSELLERS

Here are the bestsellers for the week that ended Saturday, Dec. 6, compiled from data from independent and chain bookstores, book wholesalers and independent distributors nationwide, powered by Circana BookScan.

Hardcover fiction

1. The Widow. John Grisham. Doubleday
2. The Secret of Secrets. Dan Brown. Doubleday
3. The Correspondent. Virginia Evans. Crown
4. Alchemised. SenLinYu. Del Rey
5. Brimstone (deluxe ed.). Callie Hart. Forever
6. Return of the Spider. James Patterson. Little, Brown
7. Always Remember. Charlie Mackesy. Penguin Life
8. Mona’s Eyes. Thomas Schlesser. Europa
9. The Dark Is Descending. Chloe C. Peñaranda. Bramble
10. Nash Falls. David Baldacci. Grand Central

Hardcover nonfiction

1. The Let Them Theory. Mel Robbins. Hay House
2. The Miracles Among Us. Marc Siegel. Harper Influence
3. How to Test Negative for Stupid. John Kennedy. Broadside
4. The Pioneer Woman Cooks: The Essential Recipes. Ree Drummond. Morrow
5. 1929. Andrew Ross Sorkin. Viking
6. Guinness World Records 2026. Guinness World Records
7. Puzzle Mania! Joel Fagliano. Authors Equity
8. The Look. Michelle Obama. Crown
9. Heart Life Music. Kenny Chesney. Morrow
10. Nobody’s Girl. Virginia Roberts Giuffre. Knopf

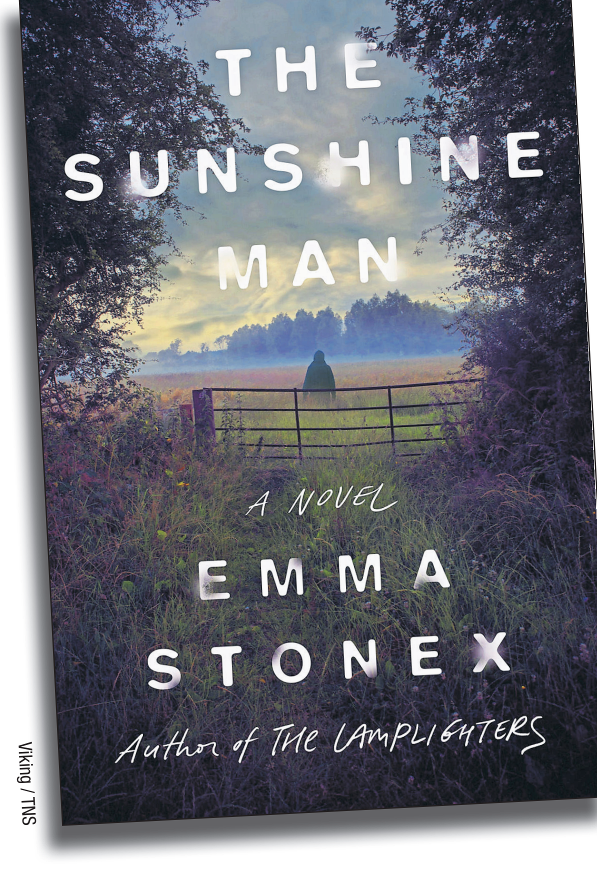
Trade paperback

1. Until He Comes. Tsarfati/Stagner. Harvest Prophecy
2. Sweet Venom. Rina Kent. Bloom
3. The 2026 Old Farmer’s Almanac. Old Farmer’s Almanac
4. Murder at Holly House. Denzil Meyrick. Poisoned Pen
5. Merry Christmas, You Filthy Animal. Meghan Quinn. Bloom
6. Theo of Golden. Allen Levi. Atria
7. The God of the Woods. Liz Moore. Riverhead
8. Housemaid. Freida McFadden. Grand Central
9. Merry Murdle. G.T. Karber. Griffin
10. Good Spirits. B.K. Borison. Avon

Reprinted from Publishers Weekly.

REVIEW

‘Sunshine Man’ has two protagonists; one wants to kill the other



Viking / TNS

By CHRIS HEWITT
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

It might be the best opening line of a novel this year: “The week I shot a man clean through the head started like any other.”

That’s how Emma Stonex’s “The Sunshine Man” starts. Her followup to “The Lamplighters” (a book club favorite – or at least, a favorite of my book club) alternates between two perspectives. One is the person who’s speaking in that opening line: Birdie, a British woman who’s so focused on her violent plan that she barely pauses to tell us that she has a husband and kids waiting at home. The other is Jimmy, a small-time hood who gets out of jail as the book opens – which we know because Birdie, who believes Jimmy killed her sister, is surveilling him.

“The Sunshine Man,” the title of which refers to a frightening scarecrow in the small town where both Birdie and Jimmy grew up, sounds like a thriller in its description and there are thriller elements, but Stonex is more interested in the invisible dividing lines that separate haves from have-nots. Birdie, who was abandoned by her mother and raised by her grandmother, didn’t grow up with much but she was loved and she has had a good life. Jimmy, who moved in with Birdie’s family for part of his youth, has not known love and, perhaps as a result, has followed a path constricted by poverty and want.

Their contrasting stories raise lots of compelling moral issues: Can we triumph over difficult circumstances? Why are some people able to change their lives for the better while others are not? Is happiness a matter of luck or hard work? Nature or nurture? (Jimmy barely knows his daughter, Donna, who has had a better time than her dad and who tries to help him but fears getting dragged into his bleak worldview).

Stonex’s prose isn’t as spare or pregnant with meaning as Flannery O’Connor’s (no one’s is) but she shares with O’Connor an interest in the moments that define our lives. O’Connor’s work reflected her Catholic faith and belief in the promise of redemption. Stonex, on the other hand, doesn’t talk much about religion but her characters grapple openly with issues of right and wrong.

Birdie’s grandmother, for instance, is almost saintly in her insistence that Birdie and her sister must treat everyone, especially the less fortunate, with kindness and understanding. Even so, she admits to Birdie that she often wonders if she did something wrong, how she raised a daughter who abandoned her children. And Birdie wonders if something she did as an infant led her mom to ditch her.

That probably makes the book sound more painful than it is. Stonex’s parallel narratives make it a suspenseful read, with two main characters who are compellingly flawed. As their fates braid together, “The Sunshine Man” suggests the two could learn a lot from each other. The question is: Will they get a chance to?

AUTOMOTIVE

2025 Detroit News Vehicle of the Year

By HENRY PAYNE
The Detroit News (TNS)

Winner: 2026 Dodge Charger

Vehicle type: All-wheel-drive, five-passenger coupe and sedan

Price: Base $51,990, including $1,995 destination charge. Sedan an extra $2,000 ($67,360 Scat Plus coupe with Customer Preferred Package as tested)

Powerplant: 3.0-liter, twin-turbo inline-6 cylinder

Power: 420 horsepower, 468 pound-feet torque (R/T); 550 horsepower, 531 pound-feet torque (Scat Pack)

Transmission: Eight-speed automatic

Performance: 0-60 mph, 3.9 seconds (Scat Pack, mfr.); top speed, 177 mph (Scat Pack)

Weight: 4,815 pounds

Range: EPA est. mpg 16 city/26 highway/20 combined (Scat Pack); 91 octane fuel required

Report card

Highs: Sleek hot hatch; AWD/head-up display/hatchback goodies

Lows: Waiting on the V-8, four-door models

Runner-up: 2025 Chevrolet Corvette ZR1

Vehicle type: Mid-engine, rear-wheel-drive, two-passenger supercar

Price: $174,995 base, including $1,395 destination ($189,680 LT1 coupe and $200,180 convertible models with ZTK Package as tested)

Power plant: 5.5-liter, twin-turbo V-8

Power: 1,064 horsepower, 828 pound-feet of torque

Transmission: Eight-speed automatic

Performance: 0-60 mph, 2.2 seconds (Car and Driver); top speed, 233 mph

Curb weight: 3,831 pounds

Fuel economy: EPA 12 mpg city/18 highway/14 combined

Report card

Highs: Ballistic acceleration; state-of-the-art interior

Lows: Will drink the Permian Basin oil field dry for a track day

Second runner-up: 2025 Mazda CX-30 Turbo

Vehicle type: All-wheel-drive, five-passenger subcompact SUV

Price: Base $27,470, including $1,420 destination charge ($34,935 Carbon Turbo as tested)

Powerplant: 2.5-liter, inline-4 cylinder; 2.0-liter, turbocharged inline-4

Power: 191 horsepower, 186 pound-feet torque (2.5L); 227 horsepower, 310 pound-feet torque (turbo)

Transmission: Six-speed automatic

Performance: 0-60 mph, 6.2 seconds (turbo, Car and Driver); towing, 1,500 pounds

Weight: 3,444 pounds (as tested)

Range: EPA est. mpg 22 mpg city/30 highway/25 combined (Carbon Turbo as tested)

Report card

Highs: Hot-hatch SUV; updated touchscreen on top trims

Lows: Small back seat for class

Photos by Henry Payne / The Detroit News / TNS

Car shoppers had plenty of choices in 2025 as auto grocery shelves were teeming with goodies. If the food market has ice cream, beverage, fruit, and meat aisles, then auto stores offer trucks, SUVs, small cars and EVs.

There's something for everyone at every price point (well, unless you wanted sub-$20K subcompacts).

We here at The Detroit News are biased toward value, style, innovation and performance. And we choose our Vehicle of the Year accordingly. As The News auto critic, I tested 59 new cars this year, running the spectrum from the compact $23,645 Nissan Sentra gas-sipper to the posh $81,550 Lucid Gravity electron-guzzler.

True to industry trends, 60 percent of the vehicles were utes, including an English startup (Ineo Grenadier), all-new electric vehicles (Hyundai Ioniq 9, Volvo XC30, Polestar 4) and fresh riffs on old nameplates like the VW Tiguan and Honda Passport. Only three of my testers had sticks, as manuals have become a niche performance feature.

Speaking of niches, EV sales stalled even before federal incentives dried up – their appeal aimed at upscale buyers with multi-car garages. Nevertheless, it was a good year for EV buyers as The News' 2018 VOY, the Tesla Model 3 (and sister Tesla Model Y), received their first major upgrades, and Cadillac introduced its entry-level Optiq EV. Don't look now, America, but the leading premium EV brands are Made in the USA.

It was a quiet year for trucks (the return of the growly V8-powered Ram 1500 aside), but dang if the Ford Maverick (VOY 2021 and 2022) wasn't on my short list again with its new, rowdy Lobo variant. Maverick is the gift that keeps on giving.

Here are our three favorites for 2025 Detroit News Vehicle of the Year, saving the tastiest for last.

Second runner-up: Mazda CX-30 Turbo

In a year when the average price of a new car crested $50K, the CX-30 was a welcome example of how a $27,470, entry-level subcompact SUV can still be stylish, high-tech, affordable.

It's this year's best all-around player.

With its sporty looks and crisp handling, CX-30 (introduced in 2020) was already a mainstream SUV rivaling the BMW X2 luxe-benchmark in performance for half the price while offering similar standard features: AWD, blind-spot-assist, adaptive cruise control and rear cross traffic alert. With its 2025 refresh, CX-30 made crucial updates to its infotainment system. Like the stick shift, the remote rotary-controlled screen is headed out the door as smartphones take over cars, so Mazda adapted by upgrading to a 10.25-inch touchscreen and improved voice commands when using Android Auto/Apple CarPlay.

With this crucial detail fixed – "Hey, Google, navigate to Hell, Michigan!" – customers can focus on the joy of driving. CX-30 is that rare SUV that makes driving fun, embodying the brand's Miata-inspired ZOOM ZOOM spirit.

Choose the $35K Turbo Carbon model with an impressive 310 pound-feet of torque, and the Mazda is a match for Michigan snowstorms – and that Bimmer next to you at a stoplight.

Runner-up: Chevy Corvette ZR1

The best vehicle I drove this year was the McLaren 750S, a carbon-chassis, twin-turbo-V8-powered exotic.

But for half of the McLaren's $320K sticker, you can have the Corvette ZR1.

The ZR1 is the ultimate expression of Corvette's affordable supercar mantra. Its numbers alone are VOY-worthy: 1,063 horsepower, 0-60 mpg in (hold on!) 2.2 seconds, top speed of 233 mph, the fastest American car ever made. On the back straight at Formula One's circuit of the Americas track in Austin, Texas, I hit 176 mph – 30 mph quicker than the standard 495-horse C8. Good gravy.

Is it as good as the McLaren? No, because McMoney buys you an IndyCar-like carbon-fiber chassis. The 'Vette relies on a more pedestrian aluminum frame, but ZR1 is much more than a track-shredder. Its state-of-the-art digital technology and cargo significantly outpace the 750S (or Porsche Turbo or Lamborghini Aventador) in usability. Like the Mazda CX-30, ZR1 also has fixed interior foibles for a more enjoyable ergonomic experience.

One more number? ZR1 is the fastest American sportscar to ever lap the Nürburgring – its time trailing only exotics like the $2.7 million Mercedes AMG One and the $500K Porsche GT2 RS MR.

First place: Dodge Charger Sixpack

Happy days are here again. It's been a tough few years at the Dream Cruise, deprived of new Chargers and Challengers. The demise of the V8-powered muscle cars after 2022 was the poster child of fun-sucking federal rules forcing the industry to one-size-fits-all electrification.

For 2026, the Charger Sixpack symbolizes the rebirth of drivetrain choice.

Thank a flexible architecture that can host electric motors in the Charger Daytona EV, ICE engines like the Sixpack's inline-6 cylinder, and surely a future V-8. The Charger is not only gorgeous (channeling the 1968 Charger OG) but utilitarian. Its hatchback design adds big cargo capability out back to complement big horsepower up front. AWD translates 553 ponies to the ground in the high-output Scat Pack, while the standard R/T gets 420. Where the previous-gen RWD Charger was an unsteady foal on snow, the new all-wheel driver is an all-season champ.

Fun, utility, interior room. Say hello to the world's biggest hot hatch.

Waiting for my affordability spiel? Scat Pack debuts at a hefty $52K, but it goes spec-for-spec against a BMW M530i that costs 10 grand more. I'd take the Dodge in a heartbeat.

Beneath the retro-style skin is a modern interior anchored by twin digital screens loaded with tech surrounded by menacing details: pistol-grip shifter, tall seats, fire-red ambient lighting.

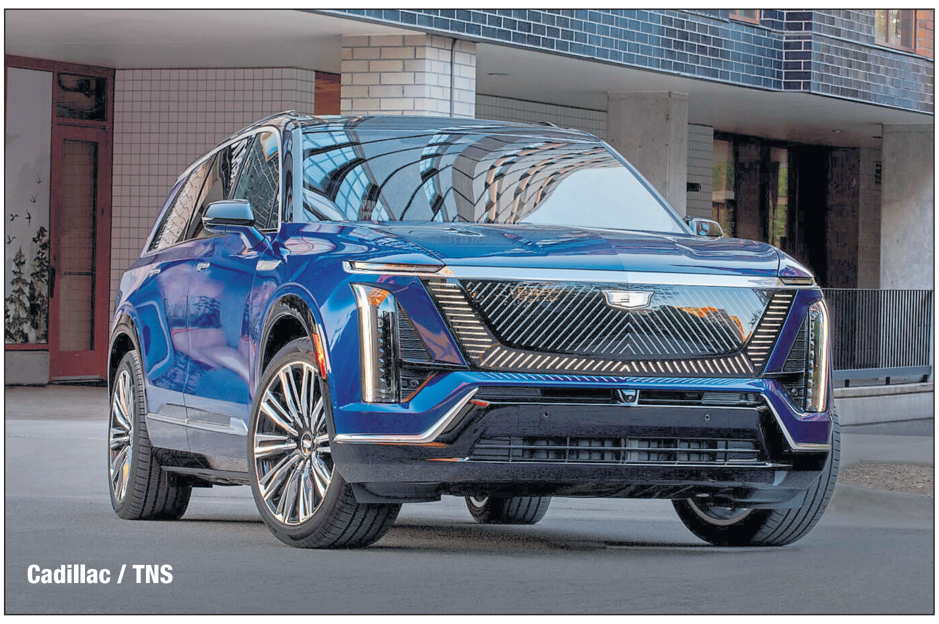
Expect more affordable two- and four-door models to come. And a V-8 return to complete the muscle car's resurrection after being buried just three years ago. Who knows, maybe a Charger Eightpack could be next year's VOY toy?

Henry Payne is auto critic for The Detroit News.

AUTO REVIEW

Sleek, luxurious and not at all subtle, the Vistiq is glorious as only a Cadillac can be

By LARRY PRINTZ
Tribune News Service (TNS)



Cadillac / TNS

2026 Cadillac Vistiq

Base price: $79,090

Powertrain: Dual permanent magnet electric motors

Horsepower/Torque: 615/650 pound-feet

EPA range: 305 miles

Recharge time (240V): Up to 46.9 miles of range per hour

Length/Width/Height: 206/80/71 inches

Ground clearance: 7.24 inches

Payload: Not listed

Cargo capacity: 15-80 cubic feet

Towing capacity: 5,000 pounds

Cadillac is trying very hard to convince us that luxury is no longer measured in cubic inches or tailfins, but in kilowatts and display screen size. And the 2026 Cadillac Vistiq delivers both the way a Midwestern grandmother delivers holiday casseroles: in quantities approaching humanitarian aid.

Cadillac's latest electric yacht, the 2026 Cadillac Vistiq, is the newest darling of the new electric epoch, looking every bit like some Art Deco glacier sliding stylishly down Fifth Avenue, its grille glowing like a radioactive waffle iron. The bodywork has that smooth, hyper-sanded look, like someone spent weeks polishing a glacier, interrupted only by the vertical lighting that juts up at its corners. It's absolutely fetching.

It's the same story inside, where the Vistiq's cabin comes at you in Cinemascope. A long, 33-inch cinematic display stretches across the instrument panel, in case you feel a sudden need to watch "Lawrence of Arabia" while waiting for the kids' soccer practice to end. It's not aggressive, just present, much like a well-dressed host fills a room simply by standing in it. Of course, if you're looking for Android Auto or Apple CarPlay, you won't find them. Instead, you'll find a Google-based infotainment system with Google Maps and Google Assistant. This requires customers to jump through hoops to make it work with their iPhones, which is hardly a luxury experience.

There's leather, or something pretending very convincingly to be leather, wrapped around everywhere. The seats are plush, supportive, and move in more directions than the average congressional subcommittee. The third row is surprisingly habitable, providing the inhabitants are children or adults to whom owe you money. Fit and finish is impressive, and switchgear is unique to Cadillac.

It shares its wheelbase with the smaller Cadillac Lyriq, but proves nearly 9 inches longer and as much as 720 pounds heavier. A 102-kWh Ultium battery pack provides 615 horsepower, 650 pound-feet of torque and an EPA-estimated 305 miles of range. Charging times are quick enough that you won't grow old waiting, yet slow enough that you'll still consider installing a home charger rather than gambling on America's public charging infrastructure, which remains as trustworthy as a Vegas wedding vow.

Cadillac's Ultium-powered leviathan has enough torque to realign the tectonic plates underneath your driveway. Acceleration is instant, smooth and serene, taking less than four seconds to hit 60 mph. It's like being shoved forward by a butler. Steering is calm, composed and almost suspiciously competent. Ride quality is similar to floating down a freshly waxed bowling lane in a La-Z-Boy. One-pedal driving is offered, although regen mode's highest setting feels mild compared to some rivals. Super Cruise remains the star attraction, allowing hands-free highway automation that effortlessly conquers the nation's interstates without asking anything of you while you sit back and relax. You know, like a true luxury vehicle should.

That said, the Cadillac Vistiq may be luxurious, but the sales experience has all the glamour of a yard sale run by people who hate yards. I tagged along with a friend who wanted to buy a Vistiq at a South Florida Cadillac dealership. There, the salesman used the test drive to espouse how wonderful his Lexus was. Not the Cadillac we were driving. His Lexus. Worse, he knew as much about the Vistiq as your average houseplant. When we asked him a basic question, he looked online like he was checking the weather. This does not speak highly of Cadillac's dealer network, which, at this store, appears to be stubbornly clinging to the business practices of 1978. A shame, really, because the Cadillac Vistiq has plenty going for it. If only its sellers did, too.

The 2026 Cadillac Vistiq is big, bold, excessive, slightly preposterous, and deeply, wonderfully American. It's an EV for people who think subtlety is for Europeans and believe family transportation should involve at least 600 pound-feet of torque. Cadillac has built a three-row luxury EV that doesn't just whisper opulence. It shouts it through a loudspeaker. The Vistiq isn't perfect, but it is glorious in the way only a massive electric Cadillac can be.

Larry Printz is an automotive journalist based in South Florida.

TECHNOLOGY

GADGETS

Ice cream machine is fun and simple

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Getting an offer to review a soft-serve ice cream machine is a dream come true, at least for me. Obviously, I'm an ice cream fan, and reviewing the **Gourmia Soft-Serve Ice Cream Maker** has to be one of my favorites in my 25-plus years of reviews.

Spoiler alert: To say the Gourmia Soft-Serve Ice Cream Maker was the hit of my recent social gathering is an understatement.

Aside from the end product, the most impressive aspect is how easy this was to set up and use, producing ice cream in about 30 minutes. Cleaning was simple, with most parts are dishwasher-safe. It's not as simple as making a cup of coffee, but it's not far from it. And it's perfect for to soft-serve ice cream; it's perfect for slushes, sorbet, milkshakes and even a margarita.

The 2-quart-capacity appliance is countertop-friendly, measuring 15.63 by 16.93 by 10.79 inches and weighing about 25 pounds. It has a built-in cooling system – all in one, so everything is made in the machine itself. With all it's doing, it does run a little loud, but nothing I'd consider a distraction.

Since it has a built-in compressor and cooling technology, there's no need to pre-freeze anything. After your ice cream recipe is made, there are six one-touch presets (soft serve, slush, spiked, milkshake, frappe, and sorbet) to choose from.

Once it's done, it stays cold and fresh for up to three hours but in my household it didn't last that long. To serve, there's a pull handle, just like an ice cream shop has, to dispense it into a bowl or cone. A favorite topping, such as sprinkles, gets accessed from a side topping dispensing compartment and there's a very popular fudge warmer compartment. There's also an ice cream cone holder.

The Gourmia Soft-Serve Ice Cream Maker is fun and simple from start to finish. The built-in cooling system is such a significant advantage and speeds the process. And once you're done, run the self-clean cycle, disassemble it and load the dishwasher (we cleaned the metal cylinder by hand).

There are other options, such as adjusting the texture to achieve the consistency you like. An instruction manual is included with some basic recipes. It's available exclusively at Costco for $199.99.

https://www.gourmia.com/item.asp?item=10478

Liiton's **American Peaks Whiskey Glasses** are an attractive set, designed to emulate some of the most iconic mountain peaks. Each glass features a 3D replica of the mountains (Mt. Rainier, Yosemite, the Rockies and the Smokies) embedded in the base, reflecting the grandeur of the great American wilderness.

The premium lead-free crystal glasses are marketed for whiskey, but aren't limited to that. Proprietary technology built into the glasses chills drinks quickly without ice.

Cold is key, and this is what makes the glasses stand out; your beverages will be chilled without ice. Of course, ice can be used, but not needed. The glasses can be stored in a freezer for future use and are dishwasher safe.

Each rounded 10-ounce glass is transparent, insulated, and break-resistant. (I'll take their word, I'm not testing that feature.)

https://liiton.com/collections/whiskey-accessories
$54.99 at Amazon

Espro's **P7 French Press** is a premium coffee maker, featuring a double micro-filter system. This produces as good a cup of coffee as the pinnacle of French press coffee brewing.

The insulated stainless steel body, with a double-wall design, keeps coffee hot for hours. The dual micro-mesh filter system keeps the coffee grit-free while producing a richly flavored beverage every time. A silicone lip lines the dual micro-mesh filters, which, when you press the plunger down, create a tight seal to slow the extraction of coffee, preventing the brew from becoming bitter over time.

Each cup has a consistent taste, produced by the patented AirLockTM, which stops extraction immediately after you put the plunger down for brewing. It's available in 18-ounce ($115.00) and 32-ounce ($144.99) models with a choice of six colored finishes.

https://espro.com/collections/french-press/products/coffee-french-press-p7?variant=40619333025971

TravlFi's **XTR Pro 5G Router** keeps you connected to Wi-Fi when you're away from home.

The high-performance 5G Wi-Fi router is built for on-the-road situations where Wi-Fi is a must. While it's great for most any need, think of full-time RVers and on-the-go road warrior professionals, whose jobs can't be done without high-speed Internet access. With TravlFi's 5G router ($424), you'll get speeds up to 3.6GBPS with Wi-Fi 6 and automatic fallback to 4G LTE.

It's built with eSIM and dual SIM support for uninterrupted coverage wherever you go. Families or larger work groups working remotely with multiple devices will like that you can connect up to 128 devices simultaneously with secure, private network access across North America.

The 5G Unlimited Max plan is $159 per month, with speeds up to 200 Mbps and no data limits. The 5G Unlimited plan has no data limits and offers speeds up to 100 Mbps. Other lower speed plans are available. All plans are monthly, with no contracts or minimums. They have complete flexibility, allowing you to start or stop at any time.

https://travlfi.com

Antler luggage is a popular brand with a reputation for taking the beating that travel puts on rolling bags. Adding to durability is functionality with diverse sizes, compartments and modern features.

The **Soft Stripe 2.0** high-quality luggage line is lightweight and has recently been upgraded for strength, style, durability and softer landings. Some of the Soft Stripe 2.0 bags are the lightest in the industry, weighing as little as 4.19 pounds.

Among the new features of the luggage constructed from 100 percent recycled polyester are an easier-to-access front pocket, practical interior pockets and a spacious interior. If you have ever had a suitcase with bad rolling wheels, you know how important they are when traveling through airports. The Antler luggage features smooth-rolling 360-degree spinning wheels, an adjustable handle, and TSA-approved locks.

There is a lot to choose from; among them is the lightest large luggage (31.9 by 18.3 by 12.2 inches/5.95 pounds) in a variety of colors for $355. The lightest expandable carry-on luggage is $275 (21.7 by 13.8 by 9.1 inches/4.19 pounds).

https://www.antler.com

When you combine all the features of the Satechi **OntheGo 67W wall charger**, you have a perfect charger for on-the-go use.

The pocket-sized charger (3.2 by 2.05 by 0.68 inches/3.4 ounces) with rounded edges features dual USB-C ports and a built-in AC wall outlet charging power prongs.

Using a single USB-C port delivers up to 67 watts of power, and using both ports simultaneously provides up to 45 watts of PD and 20 watts of PD. It also features advanced GaN technology to deliver high-speed power, with safety features that prevent overheating.

https://satechi.net/products/onthego-67w-slim-wall-charger
$59.99

Contact Gregg Ellman at greggellman@mac.com. Follow him on Twitter @greggellman.

LEFT: TravlFi XTR Pro 5G Router.
TravlFi / TNS

LEFT: Satechi OntheGo 67W wall charger.
Satechi / TNS

BELOW: Antler Soft Stripe 2.0.
Antler / TNS

When is a new battery better than a new phone?

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

A few weeks ago, a friend asked if he should replace the battery in his iPhone SE. He'd noticed the phone needed to be topped off before the end of the day and asked if I thought he should replace the battery or just buy a new phone.

I started out asking if he was happy with the performance of the phone. Did it do everything he needed it to do?

Yes, he was otherwise happy with it.

I asked if there were any issues with the screen or buttons that were causing any problems?

He said the hardware was fine.

I asked if he was OK with the size of the phone. The SE has a 4.7-inch screen, which is pretty small. Any new iPhone he bought would certainly be bigger. Also, the SE was the last iPhone to have a home button with a fingerprint reader.

All new iPhones have dropped the home button and use facial recognition.

He was just fine with the smaller phone.

All indications were pointing toward replacing the battery.

What can the phone tell us about the state of the battery?

If you go into the phone's Settings and select Battery, you'll see the battery information, including a list of recently used apps and how much of your battery those apps are using.

There will be a section called Battery Health, where you'll see the battery's stats, including its maximum capacity, which is the percentage of life left in the battery.

If you've been using your phone regularly for years, I'd expect that maximum capacity to be down to 80 percent or even lower.

Rechargeable batteries lose their capacity over time, and Apple suggests replacing the battery if the maximum capacity drops below 80 percent.

My friend's iPhone SE showed a max capacity of 78 percent, so a new battery would certainly help.

I got a text from my friend this week saying he got a new battery for his phone installed at a local phone fix place and he was very happy with the results.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossman techadviser@gmail.com.

Jim Rossman / TNS

Apple's battery stats page can give you a picture of your battery's health.

Last call for tech gift ideas

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

This last Christmas gift guide is concentrated on gifts for the person with a home office or computer desk.

There are gifts here for all ages and price ranges.

I especially loved trying out the reMarkable tablet and the Pitaka case.

reMarkable / TNS

The reMarkable Paper Plus Move writing tablet.

Teramaster F4-425 4-Bay NAS

If you have a household full of computer users, chances are you could benefit from a network-attached storage device like the Teramaster F4-425.

This is an enclosure that holds up to four hard drives, and makes that storage available to everyone on your home network. You can use the space to store your files, backup your computers or phones and even stream your ripped movies and music files via apps like Plex.

The F4-425 can hold up to four 30 terabyte drives for a total capacity of 120TB. It has an Intel Celeron N5095 processor and four gigabytes of DDR4 RAM. It connects to your network via 2.5GbE ethernet for very fast file transfers. It can even encode and decode 4K video.

It has apps to let you make local backups of your cloud files from Google Drive, OneDrive or Dropbox. It can also store and organize all your digital photos and videos.

You can set up the NAS with just your phone, via Terramaster's TNAS Mobile app.

The F4-425 costs $369.99 from terramaster.com or Amazon and it does not include any storage. You provide your own hard drives.

reMarkable Paper Plus Move writing tablet

Some people like to take notes on their computer, while others still prefer a pen and paper.

reMarkable is a company that makes e-ink tablets that let you write on the screen with a stylus and save and sync that written content to your phone or computer. Think of it as an endless notepad.

There are larger models, but the Paper Plus Move is reMarkable's first smaller writing tablet, with a 7.3-inch color e-ink screen that's about the size of a paperback book or small legal pad.

E-ink tablets are incredibly easy on their batteries. The Paper Plus Move can last up to two weeks on a charge and it can recharge in just 45 minutes.

reMarkable tablets let the user take notes, then convert that handwriting to editable text, and organize that text to make it easily searchable.

It can wirelessly connect to cloud storage services like Google Drive and OneDrive and Dropbox.

The Paper Plus starts at $449 with the basic stylus from remarkable.com.

Pitaka / TNS

Pitaka iPhone 17 Pro Max Edge case.

Acer Nitro PG16Q P gaming monitor

I'm a big proponent of using more than one monitor for work. In fact, I have four monitors on my desk, but that's overkill.

When I'm using my laptop at home or on the road, a portable monitor can make all the difference in feeling like I've got enough room to get actual work done.

The Acer Nitro PG16Q P Gaming monitor fits nicely in my backpack along with my MacBook Air and it has a 15.6-inch display with a 156Hz refresh rate for ultra-fast game response along with a brightness of 220 Nit and a resolution of 1,920 x 1,080 pixels (full HD).

If your laptop supports it, you can connect the monitor with a single USB-C cable. It also has a mini-HDMI port. The monitor can also connect to a camera or even your smartphone.

This is one of those great gadgets that just works. There aren't a lot of bells and whistles, just plug it in and get on with your work or your gaming.

The Acer Nitro PG16Q P Gaming monitor costs $179.99 from Acer or Amazon or Best Buy.

Wacom Intuos Pro Medium

If you are a graphic artist or photographer or digital illustrator, you already know how great a tablet can be for artwork or photo retouching.

Wacom has been the leader in digital tablets for decades and this year, the Intuos Pro Medium is their current flagship tablet.

The Intuos Pro Medium uses the Pro Pen 3, which offers 8,192 pressure levels and tilt support for very smooth writing that responds to both angle and pressure changes.

It has a 16:9 format to mimic most monitors and a large 8.1 inch by 11.4 inch active area.

It is at home on your desk, or it's ready for the road. Just toss it in your bag and go. It can connect to your computer via USB or wirelessly via Bluetooth. It has a rechargeable battery that can power it for up to 16 hours of wireless use.

The "medium" in the name refers to the size. There are also small and large versions of the Intuos Pro.

The Wacom Intuos Pro Medium costs $379.95 and it's available from Wacom.com.

Pitaka iPhone 17 Pro Max Edge case

One last gift idea is the Pitaka Edge Case, which comes in several different color options for your phones.

I used the Edge case for the iPhone 17 Pro Max in 600D Black/Grey Twill, which is a carbon fiber look.

This is a very thin plastic shell that covers the back and corners of your phone adding very little bulk (next to none).

There are bulkier cases that might provide more drop protection. This case is better suited for scratch protection and mild drop protection.

The thinness also works well for letting the case and iPhone slip in and out of my pockets easily.

This case has a metal charging template built into the back so MagSafe accessories stick really well.

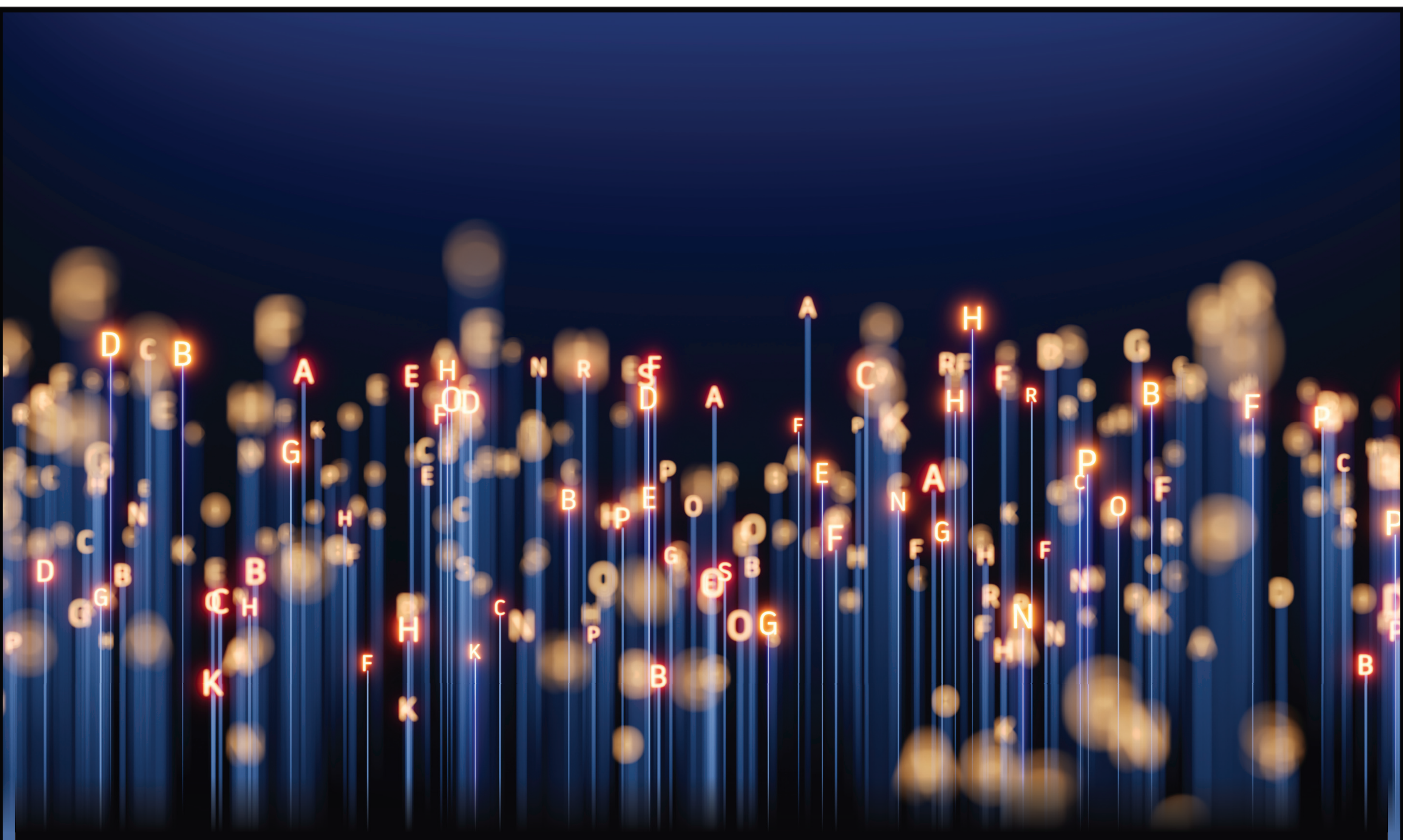
It is available for $59.99 from ipitaka.com and it's well worth the price.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossman techadviser@gmail.com.

ABOVE: Terramaster F4-425 4-Bay NAS storage device.
Terramaster / TNS

BELOW: Wacom Intuos Pro Medium tablet.
Wacom / TNS

Acer Nitro PG16Q P gaming monitor.
Acer / TNS



2025's words of the year reflect a year of digital disillusionment

By ROGER J. KREUZ
University of Memphis (The Conversation)

Which terms best represent 2025?

Every year, editors for publications ranging from the Oxford English Dictionary to the Macquarie Dictionary of Australian English select a "word of the year."

Sometimes these terms are thematically related, particularly in the wake of world-altering events. "Pandemic," "lockdown" and "coronavirus," for example, were among the words chosen in 2020. At other times, they are a potpourri of various cultural trends, as with 2022's "goblin mode," "permacrisis" and "gaslighting."

This year's slate largely centers on digital life. But rather than reflecting the unbridled optimism about the internet of the early aughts – when words like "w00t," "blog," "tweet" and even "face with tears of joy" emoji were chosen – this year's selections reflect a growing unease over how the internet has become a hotbed of artifice, manipulation and fake relationships.

When seeing isn't believing

A committee representing the Macquarie Dictionary of Australian English settled on "AI slop" for their word of the year.

Macquarie defines the term, which was popularized in 2024 by British programmer Simon Willison and tech journalist Casey Newton, as "low-quality content created by generative AI, often containing errors, and not requested by the user."

AI slop – which can range from a saccharine image of a young girl clinging to her little dog to career advice on LinkedIn – often goes viral, as gullible social media users share these computer-generated videos, text and graphics with others.

Images have been manipulated or altered since the dawn of photography. The technique was then improved, with an assist from AI, to create "deepfakes," which allows existing images to be turned into video clips in surreal ways. Yes, you can now watch Hitler teaming up with Stalin to sing a 1970s hit by The Buggles.

What makes AI slop different is that images or video can be created out of whole cloth by providing a chatbot with just a prompt – no matter how bizarre the request or ensuing output.

Meet my new friend, ChatGPT

The editors of the Cambridge Dictionary chose "parasocial." They define this as "involving or relating to a connection that someone feels between themselves and a famous person they do not know, a character in a book, film, TV series … or an artificial intelligence."

These asymmetric relationships, according to the dictionary's chief editor, are the result of "the public's fascination with celebrities and their lifestyles," and this interest "continues to reach new heights."

As an example, Cambridge's announcement cited the engagement of singer Taylor Swift and football player Travis Kelce, which led to a spike in online searches for the meaning of the term. Many Swifties reacted with unbridled joy, as if their best friend or sibling had just decided to tie the knot.

But the term isn't a new one: It was coined by sociologists in 1956 to describe "the illusion" of having "a face-to-face relationship" with a performer.

However, parasocial relationships can take a bizarre or even ominous turn when the object of one's affections is a chatbot. People are developing true feelings for these AI systems, whether they see them as a trusted friend or even a romantic partner. Young people, in particular, are now turning to generative AI for therapy.

Taking the bait

The Oxford Dictionary's word of the year is "rage bait," which the editors define as "online content deliberately designed to elicit anger or outrage by being frustrating, provocative, or offensive, typically posted in order to increase traffic to or engagement with a particular web page or social media content."

This is only the latest word for forms of emotional manipulation that have plagued the online world since the days of dial-up internet.

Related terms include trolling, sealioning and trashposting.

Unlike a hot take – a hasty opinion on a topic that may be poorly reasoned or articulated – rage baiting is intended to be inflammatory. And it can be seen as both a cause and a result of political polarization.

People who post rage bait have been shown to lack empathy and to regard other people's emotions as something to be exploited or even monetized. Rage baiters, in short, reflect the dark side of the attention economy.

Meaningless meaning

Perhaps the most contentious choice in 2025 was "6-7," chosen by Dictionary.com. In this case, the controversy has to do with the actual meaning of this bit of Gen Alpha slang. The editors of the website describe it as being "meaningless, ubiquitous, and nonsensical."

Although its definition may be slippery, the term itself can be found in the lyrics of the rapper Skrilla, who released the single "Doot Doot (6 7)" in early 2025. It was popularized by 17-year-old basketball standout Taylen Kinney. For his part, Skrilla claimed that he "never put an actual meaning on it, and I still would not want to."

"6-7" is sometimes accompanied by a gesture, as if one were comparing the weight of objects held in both hands. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer recently performed this hand motion during a school visit. The young students were delighted. Their teacher, however, informed Starmer that her charges weren't allowed to use it at the school, which prompted a clumsy apology from the chastened prime minister.

Throw your hands in the air?

The common element that these words share may be an attitude best described as digital nihilism.

As online misinformation, AI-generated text and images, fake news and conspiracy theories abound, it's increasingly difficult to know whom or what to believe or trust. Digital nihilism is, in essence, an acknowledgment of a lack of meaning and certainty in our online interactions.

This year's crop of words might best be summed up by a single emoji: the shrug. Throwing one's hands up, in resignation or indifference, captures the anarchy that seems to characterize our digital lives.

Roger J. Kreuz is an associate dean and Feinstone Interdisciplinary Research professor at the University of Memphis.

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Photo credit: Sashkinw via Getty Images

This year's slate largely centers on digital life. But rather than reflecting the unbridled optimism about the internet of the early aughts – when words like "w00t," "blog," "tweet" and even "face with tears of joy" emoji were chosen – this year's selections reflect a growing unease over how the internet has become a hotbed of artifice, manipulation and fake relationships.

DESIGN RECIPES

Color drenching

By CATHY HOBBS
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Color drenching is a design aesthetic that is quickly gaining popularity. Gone are the days of taupe on taupe or purely monochromatic interiors. These days "pops of color" and even "color drenching" are viewed as warm and inviting and symbolic of interiors with "warmth" and "soul."

The move toward more colorful interiors is a bit of a nod away from pure minimalist interiors that have recently dominated home décor. For years, minimalism was in vogue, driven by monochromatic interiors with the popular combination of white, taupe and black. While, this is still a luxurious color combination, infusing color has become not only a way to blend fashion-forward colors into home décor, but pattern and personality as well.

What is Color Drenching?

Color drenching is often defined as full color "drenching" or "saturating" a space. This can often mean the painting of all interior walls, including baseboards and trims, and sometimes even millwork. For some it is an "acquired taste" as it is a bold but often impactful use of color. When infusing a space with this bold use of color, it is often helpful to balance a space with lighter neutrals such as white, cream and even light gray to not overwhelm and to add a sense of contrast. In other words, people desire interiors that speak to who they are and displaying color is one way to show individualism in one's environment.

TOP: Scott Gabriel Morris / Handout/TNS | ABOVE: Handout

TOP: A kitchen is drenched in color through the prominent use of painted cabinetry. **ABOVE:** A den is "drenched" in color through the use of painted walls, baseboards, trims, doors and built-ins.

Color Drenching versus an Accent Wall

Accent walls are powerful as far as making a design statement but tend to just add a "pop of color" as opposed to an overall color experience.

Color Drenching Tips

Do use color drenching in small spaces, such as home offices, dens and nurseries to make a bold color statement.

Do look to incorporate "fire" colors such as mustard and orange in spaces that don't get much sunlight. Deeper colors such as black or brown can also be used if looking to set a mood.

Do test colors in a space before "taking the color plunge." Often a color will feel different in a space depending on the time of day.

Don't use color drenching in overly large spaces, as it may overwhelm.

Don't use more than one color to "drench" a room. Color drenching is all about finding a powerful color to dominate.

Don't paint ceilings. You are looking to create an overall color story, instead of making a room feel closed in and cavernous.

Cathy Hobbs is the owner of Cathy Hobbs Design Recipes, a home staging company based in New York City (www.cathyhobbs.com). She is also the owner of Highland Passive House, a Home Staging + Design Center based in New York's Hudson Valley (www.highlandpassivehouse.com). Cathy's practical, how-to design advice can also be found in her book, "Home Design Recipes."

How can I childproof for the holidays?

The holiday season brings joy, gatherings and glittering décor. But for families with pets and young children, it also introduces new hazards. With a little planning, you can keep everyone safe while still enjoying the festivities.

Angie Hicks
Ask Angi

Here's a streamlined guide to preparing your home this holiday season.

1. Guard the high-risk zones

Decorations can transform ordinary spaces into curiosity magnets. Lit fireplaces, staircase decorations, and fragile displays are big attractions for small hands and paws. Safety gates are your friend here. Place them around tree areas, fireplaces, kitchen work zones and any spot where breakables live. Even a short-term barrier can prevent a long-term accident.

2. Secure decorations and furniture

Holiday decorating often means adding tall, tippy objects, such as oversized nutcrackers, heavy decorations or towering artificial trees. Anchor anything that could topple. Furniture straps are inexpensive and discreet, and they help you safeguard not just holiday décor, but televisions, bookshelves and large cabinets year-round.

The holidays should sparkle without adding surprises for toddlers or four-legged family members. A few smart precautions give you peace of mind, so everyone can enjoy the magic of the season safely.

Jj Gouin / Dreamstime / TNS

3. Rethink your wires and lights

Extension cords and twinkling lights are part of the charm until someone trips over them or a pet decides they're chew toys. Run cords along walls and behind furniture and add cord covers where needed. Outdoors, keep plugs elevated and away from puddles. Before you plug in the light show, check that you're not overloading a single outlet or power strip. Use surge protectors and spread electrical demand across multiple circuits to prevent sparks or heat buildup.

4. Warm up responsibly

Few holiday moments beat a crackling fire, so long as you keep it safe. Keep the hearth properly ventilated, and don't light up unless an adult can supervise. Install a sturdy screen so kids and pets can admire from a safe distance. Using space heaters instead? Keep a wide "no-go zone" around them and never leave them running unattended. Winter warmth doesn't have to come with risk.

5. Watch out for plants, scents and air quality

Traditional greenery like poinsettias, holly, lilies, and mistletoe looks great, but can make kids and pets sick if they take a nibble. Choose décor that lives above arm's (or paw's) reach, or switch to realistic artificial options.

Holiday scents also factor in: candles, dusty ornaments and shedding trees can irritate sensitive lungs. A seasonal refresh helps. Vacuum carpets, clean under furniture and consider a HEPA-filter air purifier. If you're burning candles, keep them supervised and up high, with plenty of ventilation.

6. Bring in the pros when needed

Most safety upgrades can be DIY, but there's no shame in calling an expert if the job goes beyond a quick fix. Consider professional help if:

- Store-bought safety gates don't fit your space
- Heavy decorations need secure, permanent anchors
- You're unsure about your home's electrical load or floor outlets
- The fireplace hasn't been inspected in a while
- Allergies spike and you need HVAC or deep-cleaning support

Childproofers, electricians, chimney professionals and house cleaners can all help ensure your holidays stay focused on fun, not hazards.

Bottom line: The holidays should sparkle without adding surprises for toddlers or four-legged family members. A few smart precautions give you peace of mind, so everyone can enjoy the magic of the season safely.

Tweet your home care questions with #AskingAngi and we'll try to answer them in a future column.

TRAVEL

The walk along the English Bay seawall from Stanley Park led to a sunset on the final night of a long weekend escape to Vancouver, British Columbia.
Todd Harmonson / Orange County Register / TNS

Vancouver packs steady stream of discovery

By TODD HARMONSON
The Orange County Register (TNS)

With only 94 hours in a city we'd never visited together, our 45-minute wait for a dumplings order could have been a poor investment of precious time.

But we requested the off-menu No. 7 at Blnd Tger in Vancouver's Chinatown and crossed the street to an Irish pub that was so used to such visitors that it featured a cocktail called "Waiting For #7." Early into a second drink, our notification arrived via text: "Your dumplings are ready!!!"

Our order granted us passage through Blnd Tger's innocuous walk-in fridge door into the appropriately cool world of Laowai, a speakeasy with expertly crafted, creatively presented concoctions and, yes, dumplings that more than justified the enthusiastic punctuation in the text.

The revelations behind that door were among the several we packed into a long weekend in Vancouver, British Columbia, made attractive by affordable, direct flights from LAX and a desire to experience a bit of the seasons without, you know, being too cold. My wife and I watched a handful of YouTube videos by travelers we've learned to trust and followed our unspoken rule of talking to locals and taking their advice.

We took our well-tested adventure approach of seeking out great food, fun bars, high spots for views and sunsets wherever we could find them. In three full days and change, we dined at a Michelin-starred restaurant, imbibed in two of Canada's top-ranked bars, rode an aquabus to an island, journeyed in a mountain gondola in search of rescued grizzlies and embraced local culture: hockey.

One of our first and best decisions about the trip was to avoid renting a car. That limited our ability to explore too far out of downtown, of course, but a day trip to Whistler – especially for nonskiers who find late fall in Southern California cold – would've cut into too much of our time. It also would've kept us from exploring as much of the city as we did on foot.

Sure, we ventured into a few blocks that won't make any Visit Vancouver commercials, but we were assured by one local that we were safe. "No one's going to bother you," the waiter said. "It's just a matter of how much reality you want to see." And we saw plenty – but not too much – during our daytime walk from the waterfront Science World across from our hotel to Gastown, the home of Victorian buildings, cobblestone streets and a steam clock my father-in-law assured us had been around a long time.

It turned out that it was installed to cover a steam grate in 1977 – you know, eight years after I was born – so clearly we'd wandered into the newer, hip part of Vancouver.

Michelle and I had plenty of options for our lone Saturday night in Vancouver, from fine dining to the arts. We chose hockey. Upper-bowl, center-ice, second-row seats were available on the secondary market for $65 each – one of many times we found everything a bit more affordable than at home – and we betrayed our Southern California loyalties to become Canucks fans for the night. It helped that even in the packed Rogers Arena (capacity 19,700), there were no lines for food or drinks because there were so many options.

We didn't eat much during the Canucks' victory over Columbus, however, because we had plans for dumplings. Sorry, dumplings! After a 20-minute walk to Blnd Tger/Laowai, strategically avoiding the "reality" we witnessed earlier, and a 45-minute wait helped build our appetites, we were rewarded with two types of dumplings: ground bison turmeric and pork with Sichuan chili oil.

The dumplings, of course, were only part of the draw, and everywhere we looked in Laowai we saw cocktails with elaborate presentations being sipped by delighted patrons. On the menu, the Via Galaxie looked a little out of my taste profile – amaro, Scotch, raspberry, tea and lemon juice – but it was served on an illuminated stand featuring an astronaut and apparently was inspired by a 14th-century Chinese legend about a man named Wan Hu and his attempts to reach space.

I was sold, and the creation was almost as entertaining as my drink-holding spaceman with a story.

By the time we left Chinatown, it was clear an early morning wasn't in our plans. It rarely is when we travel. Besides, Granville Island was full of local residents and tourists when we arrived by aquabus around lunchtime to explore the Public Market, including quaint shops – need a broom, hit the Granville Island Broom Co. – and a diverse selection of food that matched the multicultural region.

On the chilly afternoon, we opted for the chicken noodle soup from The Stock Market and the chicken pot pie from A La Mode a few steps away, grabbed seats at a table we shared with two strangers and enjoyed the conversation as much as the comfort food. One of the women had lived in Vancouver for more than 30 years but planned to move soon to be near family; the other arrived in the city three years ago from Hong Kong and mostly loved it.

"There have been too many people moving here in the past five years," she said without a hint of irony.

After a short visit to the Granville Island Brewing taproom for a flight of local beers, we enjoyed what turned out to be a private aquabus ride back on the picturesque False Creek inlet toward our hotel to rest a bit and change for dinner at Published on Main, where the list of accolades set expectations high:

- ■ One Michelin star, 2022-25
- ■ Canada's best restaurant in 2022 (currently No. 9), according to Canada's 100 Best
- ■ No. 28 on the list of North America's 50 Best Restaurants.

Our early moments in Published on Main produced mixed results. We had to wait a bit for our table, which wasn't a problem yet led to a refreshing alcohol-free drink they brought us for the minor inconvenience. But my antennae started buzzing after we ordered. When my wife excused herself for a few minutes, our server placed our cocktails and first course on the table rather than wait for her to return. It's a small thing, but something I'd be shocked to witness at a Southern California restaurant of similar renown.

That was the only blip in an otherwise exquisite meal, though. We opted for a la carte rather than try to survive the 10-course tasting menu, and our server guided us with flawless recommendations. From the foie gras presented as a mini energy bar to the roasted duck, everything we tried delivered robust flavors that took us by surprise. The standout, however, was the Pacific octopus with red and green harissa, pine nuts and a cassoulet.

Published on Main lived up to the hype; unfortunately, our visit the next day to Grouse Mountain didn't. I blame the weather and our timing, not the mountain, but we saw little during a downpour on our gondola ride that lasted a mile and lifted us 2,800 feet in elevation. Our search for rescued grizzlies was fruitless; they apparently are smarter than the average tourist and stayed out of the rain. And we briefly got lost. All for $82 Canadian each (about $58). At least we got a breathtaking view of Vancouver when the clouds finally parted … on our gondola ride down the mountain.

Our stop at Stanley Park – OK, the Stanley Park Brewpub – for more local libations eased some of the sting from our mountain misadventure, and our walk along the English Bay seawall took us to a perfect spot to capture our best sunset of the trip.

That could've been an ideal way to end our mini-vacation, but we still had time remaining on our 94-hour countdown and made the most of it. Dinner at Carlino near Canada Place and the cruise port was every bit as delicious as a local truffle importer – who was born in Italy – assured us it would be, and we had just enough energy to squeeze in another recommended spot.

On a Monday night, The Keefer Bar, a long, narrow gem that holds maybe 70 inside, buzzed with laughter and conversations the layout guaranteed would be overheard. A musician provided an accompaniment that skewed toward classic rock, and the apothecary theme carried from the decor to the menu.

And when one section of drinks was loosely tied to movie quotes, I knew I'd found my new favorite travel bar, a distinction previously held by The Lodge in Chicago (every sports reporter's go-to joint) and, more recently, the speakeasy Tur 7 in Vienna, where cocktail wizards practice their craft based on each person's tastes.

The Keefer Bar was our penultimate revelation in a long weekend full of them.

The final one came as we departed for our three-hour flight and realized that Vancouver had everything we wanted and more than we possibly could do in a short stay, leaving us many wonders to discover when we return.

TRAVEL TIPS

2026 travel forecast: High demand for personalization, measurable sustainability

With 2025 drawing to a close, travel experts and industry insiders have been busy issuing their predictions for the coming year.

Companies like Priceline and American Express have already weighed in on the destinations and travel styles that we can expect to see in the coming year. (Hint: More spontaneous travel is expected to be a thing and the top places to visit include India's Himalayas and Marrakech, Morocco.)

Good to know, right?

But those aren't the only developments to be on the lookout for in 2026.

UK-based InsureMyTrip has just released its own set of predictions and there are two key themes the insurance provider is seeing: a deeper environmental awareness and the expectation that every trip will be tailored to the individual.

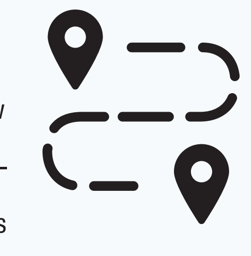
"Holidaymakers are already leaning towards trips that hold more meaning, at a more relaxed pace, meeting their personal preferences and desires," said Sara Boisvert, marketing director for InsureMyTrip.

"In 2026, travelers will favor choices that emphasize authenticity, slower logistics, and measurable sustainability, whether for a weekend escape or a longer journey," Boisvert added.

But those aren't Boisvert's only predictions for the coming year. Here are some of the additional developments Boisvert thinks we'll see.

Romantasy and movie-inspired holidays

Books remain a beloved travel companion and in 2026 we're likely to see even more of that, suggests Boisvert. What specifically makes Boisvert think that? A rise in related hashtags on social media.



"Hashtags such as #beachread, which now has more than 64,000 posts on TikTok, and rising search interest in phrases like 'best books for holiday' show that people are actively seeking reading that fits their downtime," says Boisvert.

But hang on, this development is not just about bringing the right book on your vacay. Fantasy aesthetics are crossing from books and screens into real itineraries, says Boisvert.

"Travelers in 2026 will increasingly seek stays and activities that let them live their own romantasy story, be it surrounded by enchanted forests or mystical castles," she predicts.

No longer confined to fiction, fantasy will become a travel blueprint, offering magical escapes where imagination and adventure meet.

Road trips reimagined

Some suggest millennials brought road tripping back, but whether that's actually reality or not, road tripping is set to evolve in 2026 into a more social and relaxed experience, says Boisvert.

This is largely due to the growth of #vanlife, explains Boisvert, which has families, couples, and friends alike increasingly tempted by a vacation that allows for slowing down, reconnecting, and small-scale encounters.

Need further proof of this development: Search interest for road trip apps has grown by 457 percent in the past year, with an impressive 92 percent just this quarter, according to InsureMyTrip, which seems to indicate that road tripping, which dates back literally decades, is definitely having a moment right now. And for at least some travelers, technology may help make this longtime tradition a more relaxing and convenient experience.

This technology, along with the introduction of AI-powered tools, will match travelers who want to share costs or have some company while on the road, and route-planning tools will prioritize scenic, low-traffic alternatives and train-linked legs.

Glow-cations and wellness holidays

Wellness travel, another trend that has been around for quite some time, is also predicted to have a heightened focus in 2026, one that will include emphasis specifically on restoration. And resorts around the world are more than happy to accommodate.

"Resorts and wellness providers have already started offering a wide range of wellness retreat options, including private spa retreats, yoga retreats, and detoxing holidays, for the ultimate wind-down and feel-good trip," says Boisvert, who added that the emphasis will be on feeling and looking fantastic.

This development is also predicted to be defined by both connection and the need for solitude.

Travelers may also seek immersive, place-led approaches: cooking with host families, joining small rewilding projects, or taking part in guided meditation and forest-bathing sessions to reduce screen time and deepen connection, added Boisvert.

Highly personalized experiences with the introduction of AI

The use of AI is also becoming commonplace among travelers and throughout the travel industry, as TravelPulse has previously reported.

Boisvert and the experts at InsureMytrip are witnessing the explosion of this development as well. In particular Boisvert says "AI-driven tools will be a key contributor to ensuring that each traveler gets their perfect holiday."

"For example, AI-driven itinerary planners can build detailed schedules based on user preferences, while apps can identify quieter travel windows or recommend personalized off-grid detours to match specific interests and accessibility needs," she explained.

The role of tech moving forward will be to help people travel smarter and slower, enabling highly personal journeys that also respect place, Boisvert added.

Yet even at a time when AI is rapidly proliferating and our reliance on its assistance for travel is becoming ever more pervasive, travelers in 2026 will consciously continue to choose trips that feel truly authentic, personalized and considerate of the places they visit.

Moreover, according to InsureMyTrip, globetrotters next year will be busy seeking out low-impact travel options that deliver distinctive, memorable moments and celebrate individuality, connection, and well-being.

As for technology, it will be used to refine rather than replace human insight and human connection.

– Mia Taylor / TravelPulse (TNS)